

School of Theology at Claremont



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# BY WATER AND THE SPIRIT



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STUDY OF BAPTISM  
FOR UNITED METHODISTS



# BY WATER AND THE SPIRIT

## A United Methodist Understanding Of Baptism

### MEET THE WRITER

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# Baptism and the Life of the Church

In the spring of 1989, I attended the first meeting of the Committee to Study Baptism, convinced that this was an important work for The United Methodist Church. Little did I know that it was to change my whole life, cause me to rethink my faith and my theology, and lead me to a closer relationship with Christ and the church.

The committee was born when some staff members of the General Board of Discipleship became aware they could not develop a theology of confirmation, because the church did not have a clear theology of baptism. As a result, the Board of Discipleship petitioned the General Conference to create a committee to study the meaning of baptism, particularly in relationship to questions of salvation, church membership, confirmation, the Lord's Supper, and other rites of the church.

Ten study papers had been prepared for the second meeting of the committee. For the third meeting, at Duke University, three papers were prepared. Faculty at Duke University and pastors from the area responded to those three papers. Their reactions, concerns, and questions were studied and incorporated into the first draft of the study paper, which was presented at Claremont School of Theology in California. A second draft was presented to a gathering at Garrett/Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. In both these meetings, faculty, students, and pastors were invited to respond to the paper.

A preliminary draft, incorporating the concerns of those respondents, was presented to a plenary session of the General Board of Discipleship. The final draft was presented to the General Board of Discipleship and refined before its presentation to the General Conference.

The General Board of Discipleship presented the study with the recommendation that a study guide be prepared and the document be studied in local churches during the 1993-96 quadrennium. You now hold that study guide in your hands. You also hold the opportunity to respond to the document and to help shape the final draft that will be presented to the 1996 General Conference for action. The response sheets in the back of this guide are your key to helping determine the theology of The United Methodist Church on the doctrine of baptism.

I began by saying that the work of the committee had changed my life and faith. I now see baptism as central to the life of the church and the way the church nurtures its members. I believe that "living out of baptism" is a call to both personal and social holiness, and to helping nurture the lives and faith of children (of all ages) in the faith. May your study of baptism help lead you to new insights, to new faith, to a new adventure as part of God's people.

John O. Gooch  
Editor

# To the Leader:

On behalf of the church we want to thank you for undertaking this important task. Our denomination needs greater clarity about the meaning of the baptismal covenant, and this study is one way of seeking to meet that goal. We believe that enabling people to understand and appreciate the significance of baptism can be a step toward revitalizing our commitment to Christian discipleship and the mission of the church.

How to use the material in this study guide:

1. This guide has both content and learning activities. Content material is in the left-hand column on each page. This reading is for everyone in the class. Learning activities are in the right-hand column and correspond to the material in the left-hand column. These are the directions for the leader of the group. Each session can be done in 45 minutes by omitting some of the activities, or it can take up to 90 minutes, depending on the time you have available and the interest of your group. You will need to make choices about activities, based on your own situation. Sessions One and Six should stand on their own. Sessions Two through Five may be divided to provide a ten-session study.

2. Numbered references (such as 42:9-13) are to page and line numbers in the study paper (pages 37-49). So, 42:9-13 is a quick way of saying, page 42, lines 9-13, in the study paper.

Materials needed:

Bibles (encourage members of the group to bring their own)

*The United Methodist Hymnal* (for each person)

a copy of this study guide (for each person)

*The Book of Discipline* (a few copies)

*The United Methodist Book of Worship* (a few copies)

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# SESSION ONE

## “Water-Washed and Spirit-Born”<sup>1</sup>

It is Epiphany Sunday at the Crossroads United Methodist Church. After Pastor Juanita has preached about the many ways in which the grace of God is made known to us, the Ramos bring their baby Maria to the baptismal font. The pastor asks the parents and the congregation some questions and then takes Maria in her arms. “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” the pastor says as she dips her hand in the water and places it on Maria’s head three times.

Then Maria’s parents put their hands on the baby too as the pastor says, “The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.”

It is Pentecost Sunday at Trinity United Methodist Church downtown. Hwan is one of twelve eighth graders who have been meeting with the pastor all year, talking about their journey of faith. Although he was baptized as a baby, Hwan has decided that he isn’t ready to commit himself to a life of Christian discipleship. He watches as Pastor Lee is joined by the lay leader and the parents in laying hands on some of his friends who have felt ready to take this important step.

“The Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ,” the pastor says. Hwan remembers his plans to talk with the pastor and his friend in faith across the summer. *Perhaps next fall I’ll be ready*, he thinks.

It is the night before Easter at Trinity United Methodist Church. Frank and Julie stand in the dark and watch the lighting of a large candle. Suddenly they can see the faces of the people around them.

This celebration of the resurrection of Jesus is very important for them. Neither of them has been baptized. The couple who lives next door had invited them to church and told them how Jesus Christ had given new meaning to their lives. Together they prayed that Christ would be their Savior and Lord too.

The light of the candle reminds them of the light of Christ shining in their lives. After hearing the stories of salvation read from the Bible, their neighbors will stand with them as they answer the questions which acknowledge their repentance and confess their faith

*Invite the members of the group to introduce themselves and to tell the story of their own baptism—either as they remember it, or as they have been told about it. (Encourage those who don’t know that story to try and discover it and share it with the group in later sessions.) Then pray the third stanza of “Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters” (The United Methodist Hymnal, 605) in unison. Have a different person read aloud each of the stories of baptism on pages 3-4. Ask the rest of the group members to listen for ideas, feelings, and practices that remind them of their own experiences with the baptismal covenant.*

<sup>1</sup>Taken from the hymn text by Ruth Duck, “Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters” (The United Methodist Hymnal, 605).

in Christ, affirm the creed, go down into the baptistry to be immersed and receive the laying on of hands. It will be a night they will never forget.

It is the first Sunday after Epiphany, and the congregation at University Wesley Center is celebrating the baptism of the Lord. They too answer questions and affirm the creed. As a hymn is sung, many of them come to the font where Chaplain Jackson traces a cross on their forehead with water, saying, "Remember your baptism and be thankful!"

Four different experiences by persons of different ages in different churches, yet all of them celebrate the service The United Methodist Church calls the Baptismal Covenant.

### **Why Be Baptized**

What does the church celebrate in baptism? Why should I be baptized or have someone in my family baptized? To help us answer questions like these, the General Conference in 1988 established a committee to study baptism. The result of its work is the study paper, *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism*. The 1992 General Conference has asked local churches to study and respond to this work.

As we study together, we hope that we can come to a clearer understanding of why the church through the ages has found baptism to be such a significant act.

### **The Good News Spreads**

From the very beginning, baptism has been part of the church's life.

On Pentecost, Peter issues the invitation to baptism, affirming that "the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away" (Acts 2:39). There are twenty-one references to baptism in the Book of Acts, ample evidence of its place in the life of the early church.

Let us recall just one of them, the story of the baptism of the Philippian jailer and his family.

We need to remember that these are stories about "first-generation" Christians. The relationship between repentance and baptism in these stories is clear. But it is also clear that baptism has a significance beyond an individual's response; the promise is for you and your children, and an "entire family" is baptized.

The writer of the Book of Acts wanted to tell how the good news of Jesus Christ was spreading, not to describe how baptisms were celebrated or explain what baptism meant.

First Peter is a sermon or general letter to early Christians for whom baptism was a shared experience. Some scholars even think it may have been directed toward those who were newly baptized. If you were an early Christian who had been baptized recently, words and phrases in First Peter might help you understand your baptism in light of your faith and your faith in light of your baptism.

*Read Acts 2:37-42 aloud. Ask: What is the relationship between baptism and repentance?*

*Read Acts 16:25-34 aloud. Ask: Why were the jailer and his family baptized?*

*Form four groups. Assign one passage from First Peter to each group. Ask each group to answer this question about its text: what words or phrases are there in these verses which would remind you of how important your baptism is?*

## Baptism and the Church

Group A: Read 1 Peter 1:1-9.

In the opening verses, we are reminded of the work of all three persons of the Triune God. Though they live in different places, the Christians to whom this letter is written are *chosen* by God the Father, and *sanctified* by the Spirit to be *obedient* to Jesus Christ, who is their Savior.

God has given them a *new birth* into a *living hope* through Jesus' *resurrection*. Their response is one of *love for Christ* and *belief* in him. This gives rise to *indescribable joy* because the outcome of their *faith* is *salvation*. Note the deep undercurrent of grace and faith throughout this passage.

Group B: Read 1 Peter 1:22-2:3.

They have been *born anew* through the living word of God and the gospel. As a result, they are obedient to the *truth* and have *genuine mutual love* for one another.

Yet it is clear that they have not arrived at perfection! If they "have tasted that the Lord is good," they need to continue to receive spiritual nourishment, so that they can *grow into salvation*. In so doing, they will need to rid themselves of what stands in the way of that growth.

Group C: Read 1 Peter 2:4-6, 9-10.

Jesus Christ is the "living stone" to which they are invited to come so that they too may be "living stones" built into a "spiritual house." But being the temple for God's holy presence is not enough; they are to be a *royal priesthood*, a *holy nation*, *God's own people*. The implications of their faith and baptism do not stop with their own joy and love for one another. Rather they are to *proclaim* the mighty acts of God who has called them out of darkness into *light*.

Group D: Read 1 Peter 3:18-22.

Here we can find a connection between baptism and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Eight were saved in the time of Noah through the Flood, and eight is the number that signifies wholeness and fulfillment for the Hebrew people. Early Christians called the day of Jesus' resurrection "the eighth day of creation." In Genesis, God creates during the first six days and rests on the seventh. The eighth day is the beginning of the new creation through the Resurrection.

The words *an appeal to God* can also be translated "a pledge to God." Either translation refers to an understanding of baptism as a *covenant*.

## From Spirit to Mission

These themes from First Peter will provide a helpful foundation for our study. They will appear again and again. They resonate with the stories of Jesus' own baptism. Mark tells the story this way:

The early readers of this Gospel would have been struck by the parallel between John the baptizer and Elijah, the first great prophet of Israel (2 Kings 1:8). The dove as a symbol for the Spirit is important

*(Some of the groups have additional questions printed next to their reading.) Plan time for all the groups to report on their reading and discussion.*

*In what ways is it true to say that "all baptism is infant baptism"?*

*What does the passage say about the connection between baptism and mission?*

*What is the connection between baptism and salvation?*

*Read Mark 1:1-11 aloud.*



*Read Matthew 28:18-20 aloud.*

too, for it would remind the readers of the story of Noah and the Flood. The dove brings the evidence that creation is being renewed in both stories.

In this story and Genesis 1:1-3, water, the Spirit, and the voice of God point to creative activity. Paul makes that explicit in talking about the “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15).

It is not surprising that baptism was so important for the early church when we recall the Great Commission. Here baptism is linked with making disciples and with teaching—all within the context of the abiding presence of Jesus.

In all these stories, we can identify three “parties” who are involved in the baptismal covenant: God, the community, and the individual. In our study we will discover the importance of all three. At the very beginning, however, we should be aware that in all the Scripture passages we have examined, God takes the initiative.

### **How It Was In the Early Church**

We have descriptions of baptism from Justin Martyr (who wrote about A.D. 160) and Hippolytus (who wrote around A.D. 200). From them and other early sources, we can get a general idea of what baptism was like for the early church after New Testament times. Let’s go back in history and see what we learn.

Joana and Marcus had prepared for their baptism as Christians for three years. It was called the “catechumenate” (kata-CUE-men-ate). (The word *catechism* comes from the same root that means “instruction.”)

Lent of the third year was a time of intensive study and prayer for them. They were taught both the content and the meaning of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer.

On the night before Easter, Marcus and Joana gathered with the congregation for the Easter Vigil. Other members of their family and other catechumens also were gathered for baptism. Many lessons from Scripture were read, outlining the story of salvation.

Near daybreak, they faced the west and renounced Satan, his service, and his works. Then they turned to face the east and affirmed their coming to a new life in Jesus Christ.

A prayer was offered, giving thanks for God’s mighty acts with water through salvation history: creation, the Flood, the Exodus, and the baptism of Jesus among the most important ones.

Marcus and Joana were asked three questions: Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in God the Son? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? Each time they answered: “Credo!” or “I believe!” (This is the origin of what we know as the Apostles’ Creed.) After each response, they were baptized by water.

Then Marcus and Joana put on a new white garment and were given a lighted candle. The bishop laid hands on them and prayed for them to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They were anointed with a special oil called “chrism” (kris-m) and the sign of the cross was traced on their foreheads.



Moving into the room where the community worshiped, they received the “kiss of peace” and joined for the first time in the “prayers of the faithful.” Then Marcus and Joana joined the congregation in the Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper).

This was the way in which the ancient church sought to put into action the understanding of baptism they inherited from the New Testament church. We are part of the ongoing tradition of celebrating that we are “water-washed” and “Spirit-born.”

While we cannot trace all the history of the baptismal covenant in the intervening years, we will turn our attention in the next session to the understanding of baptism we find in John Wesley and the United Methodist tradition.

*In preparation for Session Two, ask the group to read the Introduction and Part I: “Baptism and the Church’s Witness to Jesus Christ” (pages 37-40) of “By Water and the Spirit.” Then invite the group to share in a time of prayer. Close by singing or saying the prayer of the first stanza of “O Spirit of the Living God” (The United Methodist Hymnal, 539).*

# SESSION TWO

## Baptism: Proclaiming the Good News

*Ask: What new ideas, insights, or questions do you have from your reading? List these on chalkboard or newsprint, and check periodically with the class to be sure questions are being answered.*

*Call attention to this paragraph. It is the focus for this session.*

*Ask: What connections are you finding between the story of your own baptism and your reading for this study?*

*Read John 3:1-8 aloud.*

*Ask: What does it mean to be born “of water and Spirit”?*

*Ask: Based on your reading, what seem to be evangelical and sacramental elements in baptism? Allow the discussion to go on long enough to be sure everyone is on the same wavelength and no important elements have been left out.*

*Then ask: Was the term prevenient grace a new one to you? What does that mean for your life? As you look back over your life, do you see times when God was working in your life, and you weren't aware of it? What were those times like for you?*

As we begin to study this document, we need to identify the roots of our understanding of baptism. We began to uncover some of those roots in the Scriptures we examined last time, as well as in the passage we have just read.

The study paper talks about the need to restore the Wesleyan balance between the sacramental and evangelical aspects of our understanding of baptism (37:4-6).

The word *evangelical* comes from a Greek word for good news. To say that baptism is evangelical is to say that it proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ and calls for human response. The grace of God, especially as expressed in and through Jesus Christ, is central to that proclamation (39:12-20) and is basic to a Wesleyan understanding of the Christian faith.

“Grace pervades our understanding of Christian faith and life. By grace we mean the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit.” (*The Book of Discipline*, 1992, para 66)

One of John Wesley's distinctive insights is his understanding of prevenient grace.

“We acknowledge God's prevenient grace, the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will and our ‘first slight transient conviction’ of having sinned against God. God's grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith.” (*The Book of Discipline*, 1992, para. 66)

Alongside an understanding of grace, we must place an understanding of the human condition. The study paper includes both what human beings were intended to be and what we are.

God's grace not only prepares the way but justifies us in Jesus Christ, so that we are "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven."<sup>2</sup> In the Wesleyan understanding, this good news of God's prevenient and justifying grace is celebrated in baptism. In our third session, we will note some of the ways in which that happens; and in the following session, the importance of the response of faith.

### **Sacraments a Means of Grace**

Baptism is not only a proclamation of God's grace but a "means of grace" (39:41). That phrase will help us understand the Wesleyan balance of the evangelical and the sacramental.

"Means of grace" for John Wesley are "outward signs, words, or actions ordained by God" to be the "ordinary channels" through which prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying grace are conveyed to us.<sup>3</sup> They are not the only ways in which God works, but they are the "ordinary" ways—the places where God meets us "by previous appointment," as it were. Wesley includes such experiences as prayer; reading, hearing, and meditating on God's Word; conferring with other Christians; Christian worship and celebrating the Lord's Supper as means of grace for us in our Christian discipleship.

The study paper notes that baptism, while "neither essential to, nor sufficient for salvation" is the "ordinary means" chosen by God to apply the grace of Jesus Christ (37:11-13). The means of grace are not "magical guarantees" of salvation, but they are places where we can expect God's grace to be at work.

Christians talk about two of these means of grace, baptism and the Lord's Supper, as sacraments. The word *sacrament* is based on the Latin word used to translate the Greek word *mysterion*, or mystery. As an example, read 1 Corinthians 4:1.

Jesus says that "to you has been given the [mysterion] of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11). This gift is not to be found in some secret system or code word but in the presence of Jesus Christ with his people in the world with transforming power. Sacraments are evangelical because they are rooted in the good news of Jesus Christ and our human response.

The church has often used Augustine's definition of a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." While this emphasis on visible sign of spiritual grace is important, a Wesleyan understanding is more comprehensive and Christ-centered. The historic doctrinal standards reflect John Wesley's teaching:

<sup>2</sup>From the hymn text by Henry F. Lyte (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 66).

<sup>3</sup>See Wesley's sermon #16 on "the means of grace." Sanctifying grace will be discussed in connection with Session Six.

*Refer to 39:23-26 in the study paper. Say: For each of the characteristics of "authentic humanness," there is a "dark side." Then ask: What is the way things are in the real world? (see 39:27-38) What are the differences in the expressions of sin in 39:34-35? Explanation: to say that sin is "endemic" (39:35-36) means that it is part of "the way things are" for us in our particular situation; to say that sin is "insidious" means that we are often unaware that sin is really sin.*

*If your group is not clear about why the study paper puts so much emphasis on sin, try organizing a debate. Half the class should prepare to argue that "all humans are sinful, they are born in sin, and they need God's grace at the earliest point in their lives." The other half of the class should prepare to argue that "human beings are born innocent and are responsible only for their own sin. This business about corporate sin is bunk. We're only responsible for ourselves." The point is not to agree on one side or the other but to raise issues and concerns. Ask both sides to back up their arguments with references from the study paper.*

*Ask: What is the good news in the face of our human condition? Have someone read 39:39-43 aloud. How would you say this in light of the debate about human sinfulness?*

*Ask: What do you think? Does one have to be baptized to be saved? Why or why not?*

*Ask: Where does God meet us "by previous appointment?" Where do we expect to experience God's grace? How does that work out in the life of our church?*

*Check it out: In what way is baptism ordained by Christ? How is baptism a pledge of Christian profession? a sign of God's love? a means of grace? A prior question might need to be, "What do all those phrases mean?"*

*Look at the statement of what happens in baptism ("The Baptismal Covenant 1," #1; The United Methodist Hymnal, 33). Compare that statement with Wesley's. How are they alike? How are they different? What does each say that the other does not? What is important about the differences?*

Sacraments are  
ordained by Christ  
tokens (symbols and pledges)  
of Christian profession;  
signs of grace and God's love  
(God's good will toward us)  
means of grace  
by which God works in us  
to quicken, strengthen and  
confirm our faith.  
—summary of Article XVI,  
Articles of Religion of  
the Methodist Church and  
Article VI, The  
Confession of Faith of  
the Evangelical United  
Brethren Church;  
of *The Book of Discipline*, 1992, para 68)

The evangelical understanding of baptism is that it proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ and invites our response. A sacramental understanding adds to that the conviction that baptism is a sign of God's grace. It not only talks about grace; it is a means of our receiving grace. A sacramental sign not only points to grace; it is a part of the presence of grace (40:24-26). So the study paper speaks of baptism as a "sign-act" that is "grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ" (40:14-19).

The church has spoken of this grounding as the "paschal (PASS-kul) mystery." The "Pasch" was the name given by the early church to the great festival of redemption, recalling both the cross and resurrection of Christ, and later became identified with the Easter celebration. As a "mystery," it is not only something we remember but is a way of being incorporated into Christ's death and resurrection. The paschal mystery is basic to our understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In it, the evangelical and sacramental aspects of our study are linked together. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of the good news, as well as basic to our celebration of both sacraments.

This understanding provides the context for John Wesley's teaching about baptism:

In baptism we are  
cleansed of the guilt  
of original sin;  
initiated into the covenant  
with God;  
admitted into the church;  
made an heir  
of the divine kingdom;  
and spiritually regenerated.  
(See 37:9-11 and Wesley's  
"A Treatise on Baptism.")



Such a position is both evangelical and sacramental. What happens is related to the good news of God's grace and our human response (the evangelical emphasis). The sign and seal of this reality is baptism (the sacramental emphasis). (40:14-23) As our study continues, we will look at each of these aspects of Wesley's teaching. Today, let us look at the word *regenerated*. It is a word that refers to the new birth in Jesus Christ, which is part of the evangelical proclamation of the church. The question is what baptism has to do with that new birth.

Jesus speaks of the experience he faces as the baptism with which he is "to be baptized" (Luke 12:50). The early church understood this reference as pointing to Jesus' own crucifixion. The regenerating grace that works in baptism is not based on the ritual act of washing in and of itself. Rather, the regenerating grace that works in baptism is the work of Christ in his own life, death, and resurrection. The Faith and Order paper, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (a joint effort of the churches in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches), includes a statement reflecting the consensus toward which a number of denominations are moving: "Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection. It is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the New Covenant between God and God's people" (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, page 2).

The Wesleyan perspective is that this new covenant includes infants as well as adults. God does not wait for us to be able to respond before beginning to work within us. But it is not an "irresistible grace," and human beings end up doing a lot of resisting! Personal decision and commitment become essential parts of God's way of salvation.

These two aspects, grace and faith, will be the subject of our next two studies. For Wesley, both the evangelical and sacramental nature of baptism need to reflect the presence of grace and faith. Without grace, the emphasis on faith can become centered on what we do rather than what God does. Without faith, grace becomes a kind of magical guarantee that is not reflected in a life of spiritual regeneration.

## **Keeping a Balance**

Both the sacramental and evangelical emphases of baptism were obscured by later developments. The evangelical emphasis was separated from sacramental celebration. Invitation to discipleship became centered in preaching and the "altar call." The response was through personal decision, marked by "coming forward." The relation of baptism to this proclamation and experience of God's grace through faith was no longer clear.

The study paper identifies some of the misunderstandings that resulted as time went on. Much of the leadership in the church was lay, but these persons who could invite people to Christian discipleship were not authorized to celebrate the sacraments. Human response and initiative were important on the frontier, and grace could be understood as something to achieve rather than as God's gift.

Infant baptism could be viewed as a kind of dedication—not only of

*Ask: What's it like when we celebrate a baptism? How do we make clear the evangelical aspect of baptism? the sacramental aspect?*

*In preparation for the next session, ask members of the class to bring with them objects that symbolize grace for them. They should also read Part II, sections A through E of the study paper. This section focuses on God's grace in baptism.*

*Close with prayer for the renewing presence of God's grace in our lives.*

the child, but also of the parents. Adult baptism was a way in which one joined the church. The human act of decision and commitment was stressed. Baptism was a public profession which witnessed to a response of faith which had already taken place. "Rather than an act of divine grace," baptism was often seen as "an expression of human choice" (38:3-4). The Commission on Worship, in its report to the 1964 General Conference, noted that "in dedication we make a gift of a life to God for God to accept, while in a sacrament God offers the gift of God's unfailing grace for us to accept" (38:33-34).

The current study paper seeks to help us understand baptism with regard to both "the initiating action of divine grace, and the necessity of repentance and faith" (38:40-41), thus seeking to balance the evangelical and sacramental poles so important to John Wesley. It notes that baptismal covenant services in the hymnal reflect that synthesis by accenting sin and repentance, grace, regeneration and faith (38:39-42).

Keeping this balance guards against two major misunderstandings of baptism (40:27-29).

(1) It rejects the tendency to separate the grace of baptism from God's grace in Christ. Instead, the paper grounds our understanding of baptism in Christ's death and resurrection. An understanding of sacrament helps us understand that baptism is a way of participating in the grace Christ brings.

(2) On the other hand, baptism is not magical or automatic. It is evangelical both in its proclamation of the good news and in its call for decision and commitment.

It is important for us to note a shift in understanding that is a part of the renewed interest in understanding the sacraments today. In the past, the tendency was to see the sacraments as occasions in which God intervened in otherwise secular life. But God is not an absentee owner who visits only on occasion. We are beginning to discover that the sacraments are signs of God's living presence permeating life.<sup>4</sup>

The words of Baptismal Covenant I have to do with the way in which the celebration of the sacrament is a sign of God's gracious activity in all our Christian life from beginning to end:

"Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we are initiated into Christ's holy church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price."

<sup>4</sup>For further study, see Robert Browning & Roy Reed, *The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy*, Chapter 1.

# SESSION THREE

## “All This Is God’s Gift”

We talked in our last session about what it means to celebrate the good news of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. We began to see how the meaning of baptism is grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The study paper also calls our attention to another important connection. God’s saving work includes not only Good Friday and Easter but Pentecost as well. Baptism celebrates the gift of the Spirit, as well as our participation in the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. Both come to us as gifts from God.

This week we want to think through the way in which baptism is a sacrament of God’s grace. God not only *did* something for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; we can understand baptism as “Christ’s act in the Church.”<sup>5</sup> The study paper speaks of baptism as an “ecclesial event,” (41:30), that is an event of the church.

The church itself reflects this link between the “paschal mystery” and Pentecost (40:46-50). The church is rooted in both the saving work of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Spirit. In baptism, we celebrate with both water and the laying on of hands. With the water we are joined to Christ’s death and resurrection. With the laying on of hands, we participate in the gift of the Spirit.

### One Baptism

In some times and places, the laying on of hands has been separated from baptism and done at some other time. As we saw in our first session, it was a basic part of the celebration of the baptismal covenant for the ancient church.

Infant baptism and adult baptism may look different, but the study paper asserts that both are signs of God’s saving grace. Adults do not save themselves; God takes the initiative of love with them too. So there is one baptism for us to try and understand, not two different ones. Adults consciously profess the Christian faith; infants are nurtured in that faith so that they can come to claim it as their own, but God’s grace surrounds both (41:41-45).

God’s initiating grace, enabling grace, and empowering grace (41:43) are all part of what Wesley called “the Scripture way of salvation.” We have already looked at initiating or “prevenient” grace;

*Do “Show and Tell.” Ask class members to show the objects they brought and tell why the object is a symbol of grace to them.*

*Read aloud Galatians 3:27-28 and the following statement from the Baptismal Covenant in The United Methodist Hymnal: “Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we are initiated into Christ’s holy Church. We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.”*

*Say: That leads us to the question, “What happens in baptism?” Refer to 41:1-6. Form groups of three or four. Ask each group to make a list of the things that need to happen for a baptism to be complete. After groups report, ask: Are any of these elements missing in the Baptismal Covenant? in the way we celebrate baptism in our congregation? If one or more of them is missing, how does that affect us? Are we poorer because of it?*

<sup>5</sup>See the book by Lawrence Stookey: *Baptism: Christ’s Act in the Church* (Abingdon, 1982).

*Ask someone to read aloud Ephesians 4:5-6. Ask: What does "one baptism" mean? What are all the possible situations where people might disagree on what one baptism means? Refer to 41:40-50 as the basis for the next part of the session.*

*Choose one of the following activities:*

*Form groups of three and ask: Based on 42:1-18 in the study paper, why does the church insist that baptism is unrepeatable? What are the practical implications of that insistence?*

**OR**

*Ask for volunteers to do role-playing. One person will play the part of an adult member of the congregation who has come to a deeper relationship with God in Jesus Christ. He or she comes to the pastor, tells about the experience, and says, "Now I want to be really baptized. I know I was baptized as a baby, but this is so important to me, I want to be really baptized." The second volunteer will play the role of the pastor who will point out to the first person all the reasons why baptism is unrepeatable.*

*After the role-playing, ask the class: What would you say to a person who wanted to be "really baptized," now that they*

we will look at enabling or "justifying" grace and empowering or "sanctifying" grace in coming sessions.

Baptism is also one in that we are not baptized into a denomination but into the body of Christ (41:46-50). A baptism in one denomination is valid in another. This may not be supported by our experience, but looking at the paper's section on "Baptism is Unrepeatable" (42:1-18) may help us.

First, let's look at what appear to be exceptions. Denominations that think infant baptism is not really baptism at all do not "re-baptize" because, in their thinking, the person was not baptized in the first place.

Sometimes persons don't know whether they've been baptized or not. A pastor may choose to celebrate a "conditional baptism," saying, "if you have not been baptized, I baptize you . . ." Again this is not really re-baptism.

Sometimes persons don't feel that an earlier baptism "took" and want the service repeated so it will have greater meaning for them. The study paper points out that baptism "rests on the steadfast faithfulness of God" (42:4-5).

God has continued to pursue us, which is why we want to "come clean" with God once again. When we deny or defy God, God doesn't stop loving us. The call for us is to live out the claim of God upon our lives celebrated in our baptism. We will talk about ways in which we may appropriately celebrate that experience in our next session.

The study paper affirms that there are a number of things that do not invalidate baptism (42:9-13). The celebration may not have been as complete or as significant as we would want. But God's grace is not dependent on our having done everything "right." It is the steadfast grace of God that we celebrate, not a magical act to get God's attention and support.

Baptism stands not at the end, but at the beginning of the covenant journey with God. The study paper talks about baptism as a *sign*, participating in the reality toward which it points, namely the grace of God. It is also a *seal*—a validating public action through which God affirms the promise of grace. And as we have seen, baptism is a *means* of that very grace of which it is both sign and seal.

God has acted and God is faithful; God's promises need not be renewed. The gifts promised us are available through the proclamation of the Word, the sharing of the Lord's Supper, prayer, and participation in the body of Christ, the church (42:14-18). Through these means of grace, the baptismal covenant of God's grace continues to nourish our faith journey.

The practice of the church in the second and early third centuries is reflected in this description:

And they shall baptize the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents answer or someone from their family.

—The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus (c. A.D. 215)



As time went on, there was a tendency among some to see infant baptism as a kind of guarantee of salvation. The rite of baptism in and of itself was thought to effect grace simply by “going through the motions.” At the time of the Reformation, some of the more radical reformers questioned the practice of infant baptism. They were convinced that repentance and faith in the recipient were necessary preconditions for baptism. Baptism was the ritual celebration of a prior spiritual experience of salvation. This position is sometimes referred to as “believer’s baptism.”

Luther, Calvin, and the Wesleys were among those who were not convinced by these objections. They knew baptism could be abused. However, since they believed that baptism was primarily a testimony to God’s grace and that children were a part of God’s gracious covenant, they defended the practice of infant baptism. In this, they were in accord with the great majority of the reformers and with the historic practice of the church.

The Methodist, Evangelical, and United Brethren Churches that united to form The United Methodist Church all stand in that tradition. Yet it is also true that in this country infant baptism was sometimes understood primarily as a “dedication.” In 1945 The Evangelical United Brethren Church provided a newly created service of infant dedication that paralleled the service of infant baptism except for the use of water and the “I baptize you” proclamation. This service had not been an historic part of either denomination.

The study paper recognizes that some parents will not choose to have their children baptized. *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, adopted at the last General Conference, provides “An Order of Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child” (pages 585-86). This service is clearly different from the baptismal covenant. It does not involve sacramental action but is rather an act of praise and thanksgiving, with a recognition of the responsibility undertaken by the parent(s), family, and congregation as a result.

The study paper identifies two positions that our tradition rejects: (1) only believer’s baptism is valid, and (2) the baptism of infants magically imparts salvation apart from active faith (43:19-21).

## Infant Baptism a Big Question

The section of the paper on the baptism of infants and others unable to answer for themselves (42:33–43:9) helps us raise some important issues.

The baptism of infants incorporates them into the church as a community of faith and nurture (42:34-35).

In one sense, baptism is a sacrament of belonging (41:2-9). It establishes our identity as part of the Christian family. Children are part of the family; it is the place they belong. When they do not have a family, we try to provide some parallel setting in which to meet their needs.

Children of believing parent(s) growing up in a community of faith are part of that community. Just as they are members of the family or citizens of the nation, so they are members of the church (42:34-35).

*understand? Is it important that the church has a clear position on this question? Why or why not?*

*Ask for volunteers for role-playing. One volunteer will argue that only believer’s baptism can be valid, because one has to make a conscious decision. A second volunteer will argue that faith is not important. What is important is the act of baptism itself. The third volunteer will explain the position of The United Methodist Church (43:19-21 states this position).*

OR

*Discuss: How can our congregation and the denomination be sensitive to people who believe that only believer’s baptism is valid, or who believe that baptism gives salvation apart from faith, and still help them understand the United Methodist position?*

*The study paper (42:33–43:9) interprets the practice of infant baptism in four ways. Form four groups, assigning each of the groups one of the four interpretations. Provide copies of old curriculum resources, magazines, paper, crayons, scissors, and tape. Ask each group to make a poster that will help the class understand the meaning of infant baptism in its paragraph.*

*Discuss: If you become a church member in baptism, can you ever lose your membership? What about people who never participate? Or those who want to withdraw from the church? What does the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) say to us about how God sees a person who rejects membership in the family?*

*We use the language of "preparatory members" when we talk about baptized children.*

*Ask: What do we really think about children as members of the church? In what sense are "preparatory members" really members? Do children think of themselves as members? Would some word other than preparatory be more helpful? If we discontinued preparatory membership, what would that mean for the life of the church?*  
OR

*Organize another debate. One group could debate the proposition that "One cannot be a 'preparatory' member of God's family. One is always a member of the family, not getting ready to become one." The other group could debate the proposition that "One has to be a 'preparatory' member. Full membership is not possible without a conscious commitment." (Again, the purpose of the debate is not to convince so much as it is to raise issues, identify problems with ideas, and help us think about what we believe.)*

Being a member of a family doesn't give a child the same rights and responsibilities that adults in the family have, but it does establish the child's place of belonging.

The second way the study paper understands infant baptism is based on prevenient grace, that is: "God prepares the way of faith before we request or even know we need help" (42:37-38). This perspective is broadened through a recognition that the church is a means of grace.

God is already at work in the infant's life, and God is also at work in the community of faith. The vows of the congregation in the baptismal covenant affirm our willingness to serve as a channel for God's grace as we seek to love, provide for, and nurture the child in faith (42:40-42). The baptismal covenant is sign, seal, and means of grace for the infant as well as the adult.

Third, the paper points out that in infant baptism we celebrate the Spirit's gift to the infant (42:43-46). The fact that a child is made in the image of God is seen as a manifestation of God's love.

Children do not ask to be born into a given family or nation. They just find themselves there, with all of the benefits and liabilities that go with it. Children cannot choose whether or not they will be born into a family where the message of the gospel and the life of the church are part of ongoing experience. When they are, it is a special gift. As parents and as a part of the church, we are channels for the Holy Spirit to use as a means of grace for the child.

Infant baptism, like adult baptism, is by water AND Spirit. In the Baptismal Covenant, receiving the water is followed by the laying on of hands (41:21-29) and an invocation of the Holy Spirit as the pastor prays:

"The Holy Spirit work within you that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ."

The confirming action of the Spirit is celebrated for infants as well as adults. The journey has begun!

The fourth insight shared by the paper is that children are born into the brokenness of the world (42:47-48). The baptismal covenant celebrates the cleansing and renewing forgiveness of God's grace, which speaks to the sinful condition of the world.

Here we need to recall that our understanding of sacrament is not that God intervenes in an otherwise secular existence, but that we celebrate God's ongoing activity in all of life. In the "Thanksgiving Over the Water" we pray, "Wash away their sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives" . . . It is not only God's cleansing and renewing power at this moment that we celebrate but the offer of God's forgiving grace throughout our lives. This grace is already active (preveniently), and it will continue to be offered. In the moment of baptism, the grace of God at work in the present reaches back to the past and forward to the future.

That future is conditioned by the nurture of the church and family. It is through that nurture that baptized children may be led by the Spirit to accept God's saving love. Without accepting the grace celebrated in their baptism, they suffer the consequences of sin, namely "utter

estrangement from God" (42:50–43:2). The importance of our response to God's grace will be the focus of our next session.

*In preparation for Session Four, ask members of the group to read Part II, sections F through H (pages 43–45) of By Water and the Spirit.*

*Close with a time of prayer, singing or reading "Praise and Thanksgiving Be to God" (The United Methodist Hymnal, 604).*

# SESSION FOUR

## “Baptism and Faith”

*Begin the session by asking each person to find a partner and then to tell the partner when and how he or she “joined the church,” or made a decision to become active again after a time away from the church.*

*Look again at 39:46-50 in the study paper. Ask people to call out words or phrases that would complete the sentence: Faith is . . .*

*Refer to the Baptismal Covenant I (The United Methodist Hymnal, page 34). What three questions are asked of candidates for baptism (or their parents)? What do these questions have to do with faith?*

*Form groups of three. Ask each person in the group to tell the other two how he or she came to faith in Jesus Christ.*

Baptism is a sacrament of God’s grace. God acts before we are even aware of it and continues to invite us to a living relationship through Jesus Christ. As our second session reminded us, however, God’s grace gives us the gift of faith.

The centrality of the human response of faith to God’s grace is affirmed again and again in the study document. For if baptism is primarily a sacrament of God’s grace, the human response of faith is also essential to the baptismal covenant.

One of the emphases we discover relates to the faith of individuals.

For some, faith in Christ is a conscious decision located at a specific time. For others, faith emerges because of the influence of parents or other significant persons in our lives. In both cases, faith is essential.

Thus, in the case of infants or others unable to answer for themselves, the questions are addressed to parent(s) or surrogate parent(s). They are not answering for the persons being baptized, as is sometimes assumed. The questions are addressed to them and have to do with their faith.

In the case of both those who can answer for themselves and those who cannot, the congregation is asked, “Do you, as Christ’s body, the church, reaffirm both your rejection of sin and your commitment to Christ?” This understanding of faith is rooted in a dynamic life relationship that helps define who we are and where we belong.

In our first session, we learned about baptism in the early church. The Creed was already present in the form of three questions (one about God, one about Christ, and one about the Holy Spirit). The answer, “Credo!” is much deeper than the translation “I believe” implies.

What is at stake is not whether we believe that there is a God, but whether we believe *in* God, *in* Christ, *in* the Holy Spirit. The word *credo* means “I set my heart upon.” The creed seems to talk about *what* we believe. In the baptismal covenant, the deeper affirmation is that we “have faith” in God.

It is not only the faith of individuals that is central to baptism but the faith of the whole church. That helps us understand the nature of the “faith into which we are baptized” (44:4). It is the trust that the church and its members have in God who is incarnate in Jesus Christ. It is the faith that is called forth by the whole paschal mystery—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



Thus the context of the community of faith is essential in our understanding of baptism. When an eighteen-year-old girl was killed in a tragic accident, her uncle came before the congregation the following Sunday and said,

"The family wants to thank you for keeping the promises you made at Jennifer's baptism."

That congregation now realizes that those are important promises to keep! It is only in the context of the community of faith that the significance of baptism as Christ's act in the church is clear.

The study document understands baptism to be part of an ongoing process of salvation: "The grace of God operating in the time before baptism, in the baptism itself, and in subsequent time" (43:38-39).

## Faith and Nurture

Christian nurture and teaching are part of living out the baptismal covenant and that is true for both those who can answer for themselves and those who cannot. Nurture is not optional. It is part of discipleship. The study document speaks of Christian nurture as a "means of grace" (43:40), that is an "ordinary channel through which God's grace is conveyed to us."

The study document notes that Christian nurture builds on baptism. It begins in the preparation for baptism of candidates, parent(s), and surrogate parent(s) alike. But it is more than that.

The work of the Holy Spirit is dynamic and cannot be constrained by our expectations. God's grace is always primary.

1. We may be born into the community of faith and nurtured by the church so that faith develops and is strengthened over many years. The baptism of such persons as infants celebrates this growth in faith by the grace of God—a grace at work before, in, and after baptism.
2. For some, the process is begun but then interrupted. Parents and the congregation may not be faithful in keeping their promises. The person baptized may choose to remove himself or herself from the nurturing community and his or her growth in faith may lie dormant. What was celebrated in baptism remains a promise of grace still seeking to reclaim the person, but lack of faith hinders receiving that gift.
3. For others, God's grace reaches out and calls them into relationship with Christ and the church. There may be a particular time when an individual accepts that grace and responds in faith. Because it is a time of turning from sin to grace, he or she may speak of it as his or her "conversion." As these persons are baptized, the church celebrates their growth in faith by the grace of God—a grace at work before, in, and after baptism. They enter a community where their faith will be developed or strengthened.

## Salvation-A Lifelong Process

For both the child nurtured in faith and the individual responding in faith, salvation is an ongoing process. The response of faith to the

*Ask: If the community of faith is crucial in baptism, what is lost in "private" baptisms that are celebrated apart from the community of faith? If illness or immobility makes it impossible for a person to be baptized in a worship service, how can we include the community in a baptism at a hospital or at home?*

*Ask persons to tell about their "saints," the people in their congregation when they were children who taught them the faith or were role models, or otherwise important. What was that person or persons like?*

*Ask class members who did not grow up in the church to tell about someone who did influence their lives.*

*Then say: What you've been talking about is Christian nurture and how nurture has been a means of grace for you. How is Christian nurture a way of living out the baptismal covenant?*

*Ask for a volunteer to read 43:45–44:2 aloud.*

*Ask: What do you think that means for our congregation? What are all those things and how could we live them out? Another way of saying that is, "How do we become for another generation what significant adults were for us when we were children?" How can we help the whole congregation recognize and live out the relationship between baptism and Christian nurture for persons of all ages?*

*Say: Persons come to faith in a variety of ways, as our own stories have suggested. Let's push that a little deeper. Out of all the variety of the ways people come to faith, what is the relationship between what God does in baptism and the way we respond in faith?*

*Read John 3:1-8 aloud. Then ask someone to read 44:5-8 aloud from the study paper.*

*Ask: What does it mean to be saved? to be born again? Based on what we've just read and your reading as you prepared for this session, how does the Holy Spirit work in our lives before, during, and after baptism?*

*Ask: Did you ever think before about professing faith having to do with the faith of the church as much as your own faith? That is why the Baptismal Covenant includes the reciting of the creed. Why is that important? If we leave the creed out of the service, what do we miss?*

*Ask: According to the paper, what happens in confirmation? How does confirmation relate to baptism? to profession of faith? Does the way we do confirmation in our congregation reflect that understanding? In what ways?*

grace of God may be recognized in a moment or over a long period of time, but it calls us to be transformed by God's grace . . . and that transformation is a lifelong process.

Luther says, "When faith comes, baptism is made complete." Faith is not a "second step" in the process but a fulfillment, or "fill-fullment" of what is proclaimed and celebrated in the baptismal covenant. Faith may come before, during, or after baptism—or all three. Just as an emphasis on God's grace is primary to baptism, so the response of faith is an essential part of what we celebrate in baptism.

How does the church celebrate this response? The study paper talks about the "profession of the faith into which we were baptized" (44:4). That may be new language for us, but it captures several important affirmations.

To profess is to say publicly, to confess in the presence of witnesses (1 Timothy 6:12). What is professed is not just an individual opinion or belief, however. It is to affirm in the presence of the congregation that the faith of the community in the grace of God made known in Jesus Christ is my faith. Baptism has marked me as one of God's family in Christ, and the Holy Spirit has prompted and enabled me to accept that gift.

The study paper notes that when an adult is baptized, this profession of faith in Christ and commitment to Christ is part of the baptismal covenant being celebrated (44:9-10). Someone who was baptized as an infant and has been nurtured in the faith also needs to respond with conscious faith and intentional commitment (44:10-12).

For those baptized earlier in life whose growth in faith has remained inactive, the conscious return to a life of faith and discipleship calls for the same kind of public profession of faith. Since it is the baptismal covenant that is being claimed or reclaimed, that service is the church's way of celebrating the response of faith.

The pastor and others lay hands on the person making this response and the pastor says,

"The Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit, you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ."

If the individual was baptized as an infant using Baptismal Covenant I or II from *The United Methodist Hymnal*, these same words and the laying on of hands would have been part of that celebration too.

This laying on of hands and prayer for the filling by the Holy Spirit has been called "confirmation." The study paper emphasizes that "confirmation is what the Holy Spirit does" (44:18-19).

## **Confirmation**

Beginning in 1964, The Methodist Church used the word *confirmation* to describe the first public profession of faith for those baptized as infants (44:14-17). Because of the emphasis on the response of faith at that time, we sometimes talked about persons as "confirming the vows taken on their behalf at their baptism."

We have noted already that questions asked of parent(s), surrogate parent(s), and the congregation in the baptismal covenant do not imply that they are taking vows on behalf of the child. They are answering for themselves; just as children baptized must answer those questions for themselves someday.

The celebration of the baptismal covenant in connection with the “profession of the faith into which we were baptized” (now often called confirmation) is an important event. It is a “rite of intensification” in which the grace of God and the response of faith that are an ongoing part of life are claimed and celebrated by the church.

It also functions as a rite of passage, marking the acceptance of the baptismal covenant and the commitment to discipleship in a conscious, intentional way. But it is not the second step of an “incomplete” baptism.

The evangelical dimension of baptism is very clear here. The study paper speaks again and again of the importance of human response.<sup>6</sup> This proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ celebrated in the Baptismal Covenant is for all of us. We can share in it again and again. The study paper calls this the “reaffirmation of the faith into which we were baptized” (45:13)

The entire congregation may be invited to share in the reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. Baptismal Covenant IV (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, pages 50-53) is designed for that purpose. On the Sunday when we remember the baptism of Jesus, at the Easter Vigil, or on other significant occasions in the life of the community, we may act as a community to reaffirm our baptismal faith.

This may be done as a congregation as we are called on to “remember our baptism and be thankful.” It can also include the invitation for individual persons to receive a sign of the confirming presence of the Holy Spirit. (See the section under REAFFIRMATION OF FAITH in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 52.)

The study paper also suggests that persons may celebrate the grace of God in any life-changing experience with a reaffirmation of faith in the context of the Baptismal Covenant (45:26-28). The laying on of hands and the prayer for the Holy Spirit can be a significant part of such a service.

We discussed earlier the problems with rebaptism. The baptismal covenant (without the act of baptism, but including the laying on of hands) celebrates the grace of God that has reclaimed an individual who received the promise and is now ready to respond to it.

We have recognized the importance of what the early church thought of as confirmation (namely, the laying on of hands and the prayer for the Spirit) as a part of baptism itself, as a sign of the confirming presence of the Spirit in both our first “profession of the

*Get heavy. Ask: Is the rite of confirmation necessary for salvation? Is profession of faith necessary for salvation? Again, the purpose of talking about these questions is to help people think about what they believe and why, not to come to common agreement.*

*Ask: Had you thought before about the possibility of confirmation being a repeatable rite? How might doing confirmation as a repeatable rite lead to renewal in our church? What can you imagine happening in your life that would lead you to want to reaffirm your faith using this rite?*

*We often use the word confirmation to refer to the first profession of faith made by youth. What are the problems with using the word confirmation for just this one action? How can we broaden our understanding to also include what we do at baptism and when we reaffirm our faith?*

*The study paper concludes that it would be misleading to continue to use the term confirmation as we have tended to use it. The paper is clear that we need to continue to celebrate the first public profession of faith in the context of the Baptismal Covenant (44:37-42) and that there must be a time of special preparation for this event (44:43-45:3). The issue is whether or not to continue to use the term confirmation.*

*Ask: What are the advantages and disadvantages of changing the name of the rite from*

<sup>6</sup>See 39:45-40:1; 41:43-46; 43:47-49; 44:9-14; 44:16-24; 44:37-39; 44:43-45:3; 46:34-35; 46:49-47:4; 47:17-18; 49:1-4.

*confirmation to “profession of the faith into which we were baptized?”*

*Conclude a time of prayer by singing or saying the words of “Like the murmur of the dove’s song” (The United Methodist Hymnal, 504).*

*In preparation for Session Five, ask the group to read Part III: “The Theological Significance of Baptism” (pages 45-49) of By Water and the Spirit.*

faith into which we were baptized” and the reaffirmations of that faith that may follow. This understanding clearly sees confirmation as a repeatable rite, always rooted in the baptismal covenant itself.

For faith, God’s grace is always primary. We believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in all our faith responses, confirming us for faithful discipleship.

Two themes have run throughout our session: One is the importance of our human response of faith. The other is the work of the Holy Spirit to invite, enable, and empower us to make that response. Both are essential parts of services of the Baptismal Covenant.

We are a Christmas people, celebrating Emmanuel—God-with-us in Jesus Christ.

We are an Easter people, formed by the paschal mystery of Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

We are Pentecost people, praying for and being empowered by the Holy Spirit.



# SESSION FIVE

## Remember Your Baptism and Be Thankful!

When we celebrate the Baptismal Covenant through reaffirming the faith into which we were baptized, we hear the words: “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” We have seen that we are not asked to recall the event of our own baptism so much as we are called to remember the ongoing significance of our baptism.

At the beginning of celebrations of the Baptismal Covenant, the pastor says, “We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the spirit.” To remember our baptism is to recognize its connection with these mighty acts of salvation. These mighty acts are the foundation for our beliefs. Thus, the baptismal covenant can help us in affirming our faith and can provide nourishment for our faith journey.

After reminding us that baptism celebrates what the church believes about Jesus, the paper speaks of baptism as an “eschatological (es-kat-o-LOG-ical) event” (45:38). That is, it is part of final or ultimate events. When Jesus says, “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand,” something new is happening—something that is part of God’s ultimate plan.

The study paper (45:38-44) sees baptism as a way in which God’s saving work in human history is carried out. Through baptism, God joins us to the body of Christ. That makes us part of Christ’s ongoing mission, the new history God has begun in Jesus Christ. We are called to “live into the future,” letting God’s reign form us here and now in light of the hope to which we are called. The theological significance of baptism is grounded in the Christ event and this new life in him to which we are called.

The study paper identifies eight areas of belief about which baptism speaks in significant ways. We want to look at some of these areas in greater depth.

### *Creation (45:46–47:12)*

We can see God’s grace and covenant-making activity in creation itself. Water, an object of creation, can be a sacramental means of grace. That is, God has chosen to use it as a way in which divine love and grace are made known to us.

What is true for the water of baptism is fully and completely true for Jesus Christ. In him God is incarnate among us within creation. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth” (John 1:14)

Both the first creation and the new creation in Jesus Christ reflect

*Read Romans 6:1-11.*

*What is the image of baptism in this passage? What “mighty act of salvation” is connected with baptism in this passage? What does the study paper’s statement that baptism is grounded in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection (the paschal mystery) mean to you?*

*If there are five or more persons in your study group, assign each topic heading below (starting with “Creation”) to a person or team of persons. Ask them to prepare a brief summary of the topic for the group. In most of the topics, there are additional questions for reflection. These should be a part of the report to the class. (If you have fewer than five persons, choose one or more of the topics, depending on your time, and discuss them in the class.)*

*The study paper 46:4-12 talks about the image of God and the way in which that image can be distorted. Think of as many distortions of the image of God in human beings as you can. Then think of ways the baptismal covenant celebrates the renewal (recovery of the image) in individuals, in the community, and in creation.*

*What are some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit acts in a person's life before he or she is baptized?*

*Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-13. Then read 46:14-27 in the study paper and summarize how baptism celebrates this process. Note phrases with verbs like "implants," "nurtures," "promises," and "point to, anticipate." How do you see this process being lived out in your congregation?*

*Look at the Baptismal Covenant (The United Methodist Hymnal, pages 33-39. What does God promise the individual? the community? What does the individual promise God? the community? What does the congregation promise God? the individual?*

*How is one a member of the family of God? What is the concrete expression of that family? Aren't you always a member of the family? How does this relate to preparatory membership and to commitment?*

our being made "in the image of God." Baptism proclaims, inaugurates, and is an anticipatory experience of the fullness of God's new reign for both natural creation and human history.

#### *The Holy Spirit (46:14-27)*

The Holy Spirit, God's creative power, is the agent of grace before, during, and after baptism.

What happens in the baptism itself? The paper notes that the Holy Spirit is bestowed on him or her (see the prayer for the Spirit [*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 37, #11]), and he or she is marked with a seal (the laying on of hands and the optional use of oil) symbolizing the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

In the case of both infants and adults, however, this is seen as the beginning of a process and not as ultimate fulfillment.

#### *The Covenant of Salvation (46:29-35)*

Throughout this study we have used the language of our hymnal and book of worship in speaking of the baptismal covenant. It is not a private covenant between two equal parties, however. God is the initiator of the covenant, and the individual and the community (or congregation) are the other two participants.

#### *Incorporation into the Body of Christ (46:37-46)*

Baptism is understood to be initiation into the body of Christ. In baptism, the Holy Spirit acts to make us part of a community of faith marked by the paschal mystery (the Christ event). Since the body of Christ is understood by the New Testament to be the church, we can say that baptism initiates one into membership in the church. The language of the baptismal covenant underscores this in the congregational response to baptism which says: "With joy and thanksgiving we welcome you as members of the family of Christ" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 37, #11).

But what kind of membership are we talking about? Is it just membership in some "spiritual" church? Isn't the local congregation the place where the baptismal covenant must be lived out? Does it make sense to say, "You're a member of the family, all right, but not of any particular family"? Nurture demands an actual setting with real people to do the nurturing. An infant, a child, a youth, and an adult are all members of the family. They don't have to wait until they are of a certain age or status.

But just because he or she is a member of the family doesn't mean that a child has all the rights and privileges of a twenty-one year old! Somewhere along the way, for some earlier and for some later on, a decision is made by the individual. Either "I'm going to live in relationship with this family," or "I'm not going to be a part of this family any longer." The parable of the prodigal son is about those kinds of choices (Luke 15). The study makes clear the importance of an individual's "professing the faith into which we were baptized" (44:4-45:10).

Incorporation into the body of Christ is an essential part of the study paper's understanding of baptism. All baptized persons are understood to be part of the family, members of the church.

We still will need to find a way to distinguish between (1) members who are baptized but have not yet professed their faith, (2) baptized members who have professed their faith, and (3) those members who are inactive. Those seem to be the same three classifications we are dealing with now! Perhaps the study can help us find clearer language to talk about them.

#### *Justification and Regeneration (46:48–47:31)*

Baptism includes the proclamation of God's offer of forgiveness. It is not restricted to the moment of baptism, for the "Thanksgiving Over the Water" prayer says, "Wash away their sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 36).

This proclamation of reconciliation and restoration is based on the atonement of Christ and the work of the Spirit. It calls for response.

The Articles of Religion (XXVII) state that baptism is "a sign of regeneration or new birth." Yet it is clear that the new birth does not always (or even usually) coincide with the celebration of the baptismal covenant.

Part of our confusion comes from identifying baptism with a particular moment in time rather than as something that can permeate all of life. Another confusion comes from identifying regeneration with the moment of our becoming conscious of it rather than as a process that grows out of God's prevenient grace and is completed throughout life.

John Wesley was insistent that God's grace in baptism had the power to save us "if we live answerable thereto—if we repent, believe, and obey the gospel." What he saw all around him were people who had been baptized, but who were not living "answerable thereto." So he was also clear that baptism should not be equated with the new birth.

What then does it mean for baptism to be "the sacramental symbol and seal of new life through and in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit"? We cannot predict when or how the new birth or regeneration will be realized in a person's life. But whenever and however it is experienced, the study paper believes, "It carried out the promises God made to us in our baptism" (47:30–31).

#### *Christian Unity (48:1–6)*

The study paper talks about baptism as the sign and seal of our common discipleship, bringing us into unity "with Christ, with one another, and with the Church in every time and place" (48:2–3). The Baptismal Covenant (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, pages 33–39) highlights these three kinds of Christian unity. For example, regarding unity with Christ, see the third question on page 34 and the seventh and eighth line from the bottom on page 36; for unity with each other, look for references to "brothers and sisters," and the congregational

*Read aloud Ephesians 4:4–6 and Galatians 3:27–28. What do we learn from these passages about how we become a part of the body of Christ? In practical terms, is there a difference between 1) church membership on the basis of profession of faith and 2) church membership on the basis of initiation into the family of God? What, if any, is the difference? If there is a difference, how can we affirm that those who have not yet professed their faith are really a part of the family?*

*What are some specific ways baptism proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ? How can we, as a congregation, help the parents of those being baptized and youth who are professing the faith into which they were baptized respond to the good news?*

*What do you think (based on the study paper) regeneration means? What are its characteristics? (see 47:17–26).*

*Ask: How do we both affirm God's grace and the fact that we need to live up to that grace? That is, how do we say both that salvation is God's gift and that we have to do something to respond to that gift? How would you explain that to a twelve-year-old youth in your church?*

*Read 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:4–6; Galatians 3:27–28. Ask: What do these passages tell us about the relationship of baptism to*

*Christian unity? If we took them seriously in our congregation, what changes would we need to make?*

*Ask the class to read the "Thanksgiving Over the Water" (The United Methodist Hymnal, page 36). Together, make a list of the mighty acts of God listed in the prayer.*

responses in the middle of page 37 and the bottom of 38; for unity with the church, see the introduction to the questions on page 34 and section 9 on page 35.]

In the great "Thanksgiving Over the Water" prayer of the baptismal covenant, the part of our common story having to do with water is recalled.

These are parts of the story of God's saving works that gave rise to the beliefs we've looked at. It is possible for us to use the symbol of water that we find in this prayer to illuminate our own spiritual journey. We can be nourished by recalling the mighty acts of God in our own lives.

There have been times when chaos seemed ready to engulf us, but the light of God's grace sustained and empowered us. Interestingly, water is a symbol of both destruction and sustenance. It can overwhelm us, but without it we cannot live. The water of baptism reminds us that in the midst of the threat of destruction, God has acted in our lives to sustain us.

When the rains fell and the floods came, the ark became an instrument of salvation. In Christian symbolism, the ark has become a symbol for the church. When we seem to be "at sea" in our lives, with *terra firma* nowhere in sight, the church can keep us afloat. Within it are persons who have cared for us and shared our burdens and joys with us. But even more than that, it is the arena in which we are reminded of God's love and care even when we do not feel it. The rainbow tells us the sun is there, even if we cannot see it. In the water of baptism, there is a rainbow of hope that nourishes us, even as the ark of the church keeps us from being drowned.

We have known slavery too—slavery to old ideas, to preconditioned attitudes, to destructive habits, to oppressive forces beyond our control. However, we know that God is a liberating God who acts to free us. The water of baptism is the sign that God has acted to free us from sin and death and will act to liberate us from the oppression that may still enslave us. The way to freedom leads through the water. It was true for the Israelites, and it is true for us. We are called to go through the Jordan to the land of promise. Baptism recalls the past, affirms God's power in the present, and leads us into the future.

Spiritual pilgrimage is a matter of moving on. In the midst of the valley, we are encouraged to "keep on keeping on." The question of Wesley: "Are you going on to perfection?" must be answered anew every time we celebrate a baptism and renew our own baptismal covenant. We have not arrived; we are a people on the way.

Yet we have been nurtured in the water of a womb, for the Holy Spirit is continually at work bringing us to new birth; and we are anointed with the Spirit in baptism and in our reaffirmation of our baptismal covenant.

We are birthed to discipleship in the womb of the Spirit. Being born may be accompanied by pain, but it is always enabled by the nourishment we have already received. God's prevenient grace, the

grace that goes before, nourishing, sustaining, and preparing us, enables us to respond to the claim of Christ upon our lives. The water of baptism reminds us of that Spirit-womb that brings us to new life.

Note: Some of the material in this session reflects an article by the writer published in *Sacramental Life* (Vol. 6, No. 1; February/March, 1993, pages 6-11).

*In preparation for Session Six, ask the group to read Part IV (pages 48-49) of By Water and the Spirit.*

*Close with a time of prayer, concluding by singing or saying "Thy Holy Wings, O Savior" (The United Methodist Hymnal, 502).*

# SESSION SIX

## Living Our Baptism

*Begin by asking persons to talk about new ideas, new feelings, new growth in faith as a result of this class. What has happened to you? your feelings? your faith?*

*Look together at the section of the study paper on "Sanctification and Baptism," (47:33-39) What does it mean to you to say "baptism is the doorway to the sanctified life?" What are some of the characteristics of sanctification that are listed here? How do they play out in our lives?*

When Martin Luther got up in the morning and put water on his face, he would say, "I am baptized!" It was a way of reminding himself that living out his baptism was a key to discipleship.

We have discussed the importance of our reaffirmations of the faith into which we were baptized. Sometimes we will participate in that kind of celebration of the baptismal covenant as a congregation, sometimes as individuals. Finally, for us as well as for Martin Luther, the baptismal covenant is to be lived out in daily discipleship.

The call to discipleship is a call to be part of a community of faith. When a traveling rabbi in the first century said: "Come, follow me," it was not only an invitation to respond personally but to become a part of the "school of disciples" following that rabbi.

The study paper invites us to understand the church as a crucial means of grace. Though God may encounter persons in other ways, the usual way in which grace comes to us is within the life of the community of faith (48:10-15). The church has been constituted by Christ "as his Body, a living spiritual organism, by the power of the Holy Spirit" (46:38-39). While the church is more than any particular local congregation, it is within these particular localized communities of faith that we receive the grace of God in a variety of ways.

Baptism, the paper reminds us, is "Christ's act in the church" (46:39-40). Through it we become an integral part of the church.

We have already talked about the ways in which God's prevenient grace brings us to the time of baptism and how baptism is a sign and seal of God's justifying grace in our lives.

There is a third way in which the Holy Spirit works within us, namely with sanctifying grace.

Notice that sanctification in the Wesleyan tradition includes both our love of God and our care for our neighbor. Our hymnal follows that tradition in having sections on both "personal holiness" and "social holiness."

It has become increasingly clear throughout our study that baptism is not simply a momentary event but signifies a lifelong process. The Holy Spirit works within us to help us "grow in grace." One of the places where that happens is with our "conscious relationship with Jesus Christ."

The study paper also speaks of baptism as initiating "our vocation in the general ministry of the Church in the world" (46:44). Baptism is not only a mark of our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ and our incorporation into the community of faith, but it is also our



commission to be in ministry to the world. This commission is rooted in a biblical understanding of anointing.

In the study paper we read about “the anointing with the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the laying on of hands and the optional use of oil” (46:22-24). Since this practice may not be familiar to some of us, let’s note the description in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*:

The pastor may trace on the forehead of each newly baptized person the sign of the cross in silence or with the words: “Name, [child of God], you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” Olive oil may be used in this action, following the biblical custom of anointing prophets (1 Kings 19:16), priests (Exodus 29:7), and kings (1 Kings 1:39). Jesus’ titles *Christ* and *Messiah* both mean “Anointed One,” and the New Testament repeatedly calls Christ our high priest and king. Christians in baptism become members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), which is a “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9). Anointing at baptism is a reminder that all Christians are anointed into this royal priesthood (page 91).

Whether or not an actual anointing is done, the laying on of hands carries with it this significant theme. It is an anointing to a task, a mission. It gives us a job to do.

To live out our baptism is to let the community of faith nurture us so that we may discover “new opportunities for service where individual gifts and graces are discerned, developed, and used” (46:45-46). All baptized Christians are commissioned—anointed to be in ministry.

Living our baptism involves living out our calling to the priesthood of all believers. In the baptismal covenant, we say to our new brothers and sisters in Christ, “Through baptism you are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God’s new creation and made to share in Christ’s royal priesthood” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 37).

Living out our baptism involves us not only in our own spiritual growth but also in ministry to the needs of others. Our baptism calls us to confront “the spiritual forces of wickedness” and “the evil powers of this world” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 34). Baptism calls us not only to reject these forces and powers but to be engaged in doing something about it. Thus we are asked, “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”

## **Baptism and the Lord’s Supper**

The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is closely linked with baptism. Both sacraments witness to the paschal mystery—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Both are based on God’s self-giving; both celebrate the presence of the risen Christ in the life of the church and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in sustaining us and enabling our ministry in Christ’s name.

For most Christian groups, only the baptized can share in the holy meal. Since John Wesley believed that the Lord’s Supper could be a “converting ordinance,” United Methodists do not all follow that

*Ask: According to the paper, what is the relationship between baptism and our ministry as Christians? (48:30-38) What does service in the congregation have to do with baptism? service beyond the congregation? What specific things can we do to help one another discover, develop, and use the gifts God has given us? What does that have to do with baptism? How do we confront the forces of evil in the world? Is that a part of our baptism?*

requirement. Still, to eat at the Lord's table implies that one is willing to be marked as a part of Christ's family. So the paper observes that those who receive communion but are not baptized should be nurtured toward it as soon as possible.

The relationship between the two sacraments is more basic, however. The study paper observes that the Lord's Supper is where "the body of Christ is most fully expressed" (48:18-20). Like baptism, it is rooted in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ who invites us to be nourished by God's grace.

Through Holy Communion (another name by which this sacrament is known), we remember the grace given to us at our baptism and are nourished by the Holy Spirit so that we can fulfill the promises of salvation proclaimed and enacted there.

The earliest name by which this sacrament was known is "the Eucharist"—literally, "the thanksgiving." Not only did Jesus give thanks when he took the bread and the cup, but we give thanks for the presence of the risen Christ, and the grace of God at work within us through the Holy Spirit.

Both the Lord's Supper and baptism enable us to "proclaim and participate in all that God has done, is doing, and will continue to do for us in Christ" (48:20-22). Both are celebrations of the new covenant Christ brings.

### **Baptism and Other Rites of the Church**

This covenant is also basic to our understanding of the service of Christian marriage and the service of death and resurrection found in the hymnal.

Our expressions of love and fidelity to one another grow out of response to God's initiative of love. That dynamic also marks the baptismal covenant. Christians who make that covenant with God and with one another are asked to do so "through the grace of Jesus Christ, who calls you into union with himself as acknowledged in your baptism" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 865).

The service of Death and Resurrection is another celebration of the baptismal covenant. As Hoyt Hickman says:

The Christian gospel is a message of death and resurrection. Jesus Christ died and was raised again for our salvation. For the Christian, salvation is to die and be raised with Christ. As Romans 6:3-11 makes clear, this is acted out symbolically in baptism, daily as we "walk in newness of life," and finally in our death and resurrection. This is the theme, not only of "A Service of Death and Resurrection" but of every service of Christian worship. This is why this service, like the Sunday service and the Service of Christian Marriage, is based on the Baptismal Covenant.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Hoyt L. Hickman, *The Worship Resources of The United Methodist Hymnal* (Abingdon, 1989).

*Ask: Had you ever thought before about funeral services being based on baptism? What practical differences does that make? What difference does it make in the way you feel about services of death and resurrection?*

*Conclude the study by discussing as many of these questions as time allows. If you have a large group, you may want to work in groups of three.*

*1. How has this study helped us understand the way we now practice baptism in this congregation?*

*2. Are there ways we could make baptismal celebrations more meaningful?*

*3. In the light of the study, how do you now understand the significance of your own baptism?*

*4. What does living out your baptism now mean for you? What will you do (new and different) as a result of this study?*

*If there is time, ask class members to complete the survey questionnaire in the back of this study guide during the class meeting. You may collect the completed surveys and mail them to the address given, or individuals may choose to mail in their own. If there is not time to do this in class, encourage individuals to complete the questionnaire on their own and mail it in. The response to the study is an important part of preparing the final document for presentation to the 1996 General Conference.*

*Provide for a time of prayer. The following may be used as a guide:*

*"Baptism is a crucial threshold that we cross on our journey in faith." Let us pray for one another that we may know what it means to live out our baptism.*

*—silent and/or shared prayer  
"Baptism is at the heart of the*

*gospel of grace." Let us pray that in increasingly significant ways, we may live as those who have been marked in baptism with the good news of God's grace.*

*—silent and/or shared prayer*

*"Baptism is at the core of the church's mission." Let us pray that we may claim the ministry given us by our baptism, reaching out to a broken and hurting world.*

*—silent and/or shared prayer*

*"As baptized people of God, we respond with praise and thanksgiving."*

*—The Lord's Prayer*

*If possible, close by singing the hymn quoted at the end of the study paper: "Wash, O God, our Sons and Daughters" (The United Methodist Hymnal, #605).*

# Glossary

## **believer's baptism**

the view that repentance and faith in the recipient are necessary preconditions for baptism and that infants cannot be baptized.

## **covenant**

an agreement between two or more parties based on a promise that establishes a special relationship with the expectation of faithful response; Wesley speaks of "the covenant of grace, which God through Christ has established." (See John Wesley's sermon on "The Righteousness of Faith")

## **eschatological**

part of final or ultimate events. Baptism is eschatological in that we are called to "live into the future," letting God's reign form us here and now in light of the hope to which we are called.

## **evangelical**

comes from a Greek word for "good news." To say that baptism is evangelical is to say that it proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ and calls for human response.

## **faith**

trust and confidence in, as well as commitment and loyalty to, that which provides basic life orientation for both mind and heart; thus for Wesley, not only an assent to the gospel of Christ but a full reliance and trust in him as our salvation, which is the free gift of God and the only condition for receiving God's justifying and sanctifying grace. (see John Wesley's sermons, "Salvation by Faith" and "Justification by Faith.")

## **grace**

the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit. (*The Discipline*, par 66)

## **means of grace**

"outward signs, words, or actions ordained by God" to be the "ordinary channels" through which prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying grace are conveyed to us. They are not the only ways in which God works, but they are the "ordinary" ways—the places where God meets us "by previous appointment," as it were.

## **paschal mystery**

The "Pasch" was the name given by the early church to the great festival of redemption, recalling both the cross and resurrection of Christ, and later identified with the Easter celebration. The paschal mystery is not only something we remember but is a way of being incorporated into Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

## **prevenient grace**

God's love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses, prompting our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will and our 'first slight transient conviction' of having sinned against God. (*The Discipline*, par 66)

## **profession of faith**

to say publicly, to confess in the presence of witnesses; affirming in the presence of the congregation that the faith of the community in the grace of God made known in Jesus Christ is my faith.

## **sacrament**

based on the Latin word used to translate the Greek word *mysterion*, or mystery. Sacraments are ordained by Christ; tokens (symbols and pledges) of Christian profession; signs of grace and God's love (God's good will toward us), means of grace by which God works in us to quicken, strengthen, and confirm our faith. (Summary of Article XVI, Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church and Article VI, The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church; *The Discipline*, par 66).

## **sanctification**

the "work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit" that enables us "to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor," thus living "in accordance with God's will" and striving for holiness. (*The Discipline*, par 66)

# **For Further Study**

These are resources that informed the work of the committee. You will find them helpful for further reading and study.

**Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry** Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) #088974, ISBN 2825407097, \$5.95.

Ole E. Borgen, **John Wesley on the Sacraments** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) Out of print; check your church library.

Gayle C. Felton, **The Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) ISBN 068733327X, \$16.95.

Hoyt L. Hickman, **Workbook on Communion and Baptism** (Discipleship Resources, 1990) \$5.95.

Robert Browning and Roy Reed, **The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy** (Religious Education Press, 1985) #143451, ISBN 0891350446, \$14.95.

Laurence Hull Stookey, **Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982) ISBN 0687023645, \$12.95.



# Report of the Committee to Study Baptism

We move that the General Board of Discipleship receive the document, *By Water and the Spirit, a United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* and submit it to the 1992 General Conference. We request that the General Conference receive it as a document to be studied in the local churches in the coming quadrennium.

We further recommend:

- 1) that The United Methodist Publishing House be asked to prepare and publish the document, along with a study guide for its use,
- 2) that the present committee reconvene early in the quadrennium to establish a process for the study of and response to the document,
- 3) that the staff of Worship, Christian Education, and Church School Publications monitor and collect responses and,
- 4) that the present committee reconvene at a time to be determined later in the quadrennium to evaluate responses, determine what changes need to be made in the document, and submit recommendations to the 1996 General Conference.

We recommend that the balance of the funding for the committee's work in the present quadrennium fund the work of the committee for the 1992-96 quadrennium

Mark Trotter, Chair  
Peggy Sewell, Secretary  
Ole Borgen  
Sang E. Chun  
Dale Dunlap  
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# BY WATER AND THE SPIRIT

## A United Methodist Understanding Of Baptism

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# BY WATER AND THE SPIRIT

## A United Methodist Understanding Of Baptism

1 Contemporary United Methodism needs to recover and reformulate its understanding of  
baptism. To do this, we must look to our heritage as Methodists and Evangelical United  
Brethren, and indeed, to the foundations of Christian tradition. Throughout our history, baptism  
has been understood in conflicting and even contradictory ways. A proper understanding of  
5 baptism as a sacrament, restoring the Wesleyan balance between its sacramental and evangelical  
aspects, will enable United Methodists to participate in this sacrament with renewed insight.

Within the Methodist tradition, baptism has long been a subject of much concern, even  
controversy. John Wesley upheld the sacramental theology which he received from his Anglican  
heritage. He taught that in baptism a child was cleansed of the guilt of original sin, initiated into  
10 the covenant with God, admitted into the Church, made an heir to the divine kingdom, and  
spiritually regenerated. While baptism was neither essential to, nor sufficient for salvation, it  
was the "ordinary means" which God had designated for the application in human lives of the  
benefits of the work of Christ.

On the other hand, although he affirmed the regenerating grace of infant baptism, he also  
15 insisted upon the necessity of adult conversion for those who have fallen from grace. A person  
who matured into moral accountability must respond to God's grace in repentance and faith.  
Without personal decision and commitment to Christ, the baptismal gift of regeneration was  
rendered ineffectual.

Therefore baptism for Wesley was a part of a lifelong process of salvation. He saw spiritual  
20 rebirth as a two-fold experience in the normal process of Christian development to be received  
through baptism in infancy and through conversion in adulthood. Salvation included both God's  
initiating activity of grace and a willing human response.

In its development in the United States, Methodism was unable to maintain this Wesleyan  
balance of sacramental and evangelical emphases. For one reason, during the late eighteenth  
25 and early nineteenth centuries the Methodist movement was largely under the leadership of lay  
persons who were not permitted to administer the sacraments. In addition, on the American  
frontier where human ability and action were stressed, the revivalistic call for individual  
decision-making, though important, was open to exaggeration. The sacramental teachings of  
Wesley tended to be ignored. In this context, while infant baptism continued to be practiced and  
30 vigorously defended, its significance became weakened and ambiguous.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the theological understandings of much of Methodism  
were influenced by a new set of ideas that had become dominant in American culture. These  
ideas included optimism about the progressive improvement of humankind and confidence in  
the social benefits of scientific discovery, technology and education. Assumptions of original  
35 sin gave way before the assertion that human nature was essentially unspoiled. In this  
intellectual milieu, the old evangelical insistence upon conversion and spiritual regeneration  
seemed quaint and clearly unnecessary.

Thus the creative Wesleyan synthesis of sacramentalism and evangelicalism was torn  
asunder. As a result, infant baptism was given a variety of interpretations and was often reduced  
40 to a ceremony of dedication. Adult baptism was sometimes interpreted as a public

1 acknowledgment of God's grace and a confession of faith, but was widely viewed simply as an  
act of joining the Church. By the middle of the twentieth century, Methodism in general had  
ceased to understand baptism as authentically sacramental. Rather than an act of divine grace, it  
was seen as an expression of human choice.

5 Baptism was also a subject of concern and controversy in the Evangelical and United Brethren  
traditions that were brought together in 1946 in The Evangelical United Brethren Church. Their  
early pietistic revivalism, buttressed by Arminian theology, emphasized bringing people to  
salvation through Christian experience. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both  
10 Evangelical and United Brethren theologians stressed the importance of baptism as integral to the  
proclamation of the gospel, as a rite initiating persons into the covenant community (paralleling  
circumcision), and as a sign of the new birth, that gracious divine act by which persons are  
redeemed from sin and reconciled to God. The former Evangelical Church, whose doctrine and  
*Discipline* resembled that of The Methodist Episcopal Church, consistently favored the baptism  
of infants. The United Brethren provided for the baptism of both infants and adults.

15 Following the union of 1946, The Evangelical United Brethren Church adopted a ritual that  
included services of baptism for infants and adults, and also a newly created service for the  
dedication of infants that had no precedent in official rituals of either the former Evangelical  
Church or the former United Brethren Church.

20 The 1960–1964 revision of *The Methodist Hymnal*, including rituals, gave denominational  
leaders an opportunity to recover the sacramental nature of baptism in contemporary  
Methodism. The General Commission on Worship sounded this note quite explicitly in its  
introduction to the new ritual in 1964:

25 In revising the Order for the Administration of Baptism, the Commission on Worship has  
endeavored to keep in mind that baptism is a sacrament, and to restore it to the Evangelical-  
Methodist concept set forth in our Articles of Religion. . . . Due recognition was taken of the  
critical reexamination of the theology of the Sacrament of Baptism which is currently taking  
place in ecumenical circles, and of its theological content and implications.

30 The commission provided a brief historical perspective demonstrating that the understanding  
of baptism as a sacrament had been watered down, if not lost altogether over the years. Many in  
the Church regarded baptism, both of adults and infants, as a dedication rather than a sacrament.  
The commission pointed out that in a dedication we make a gift to a life to God for God to  
accept, while in a sacrament God offers the gift of God's unfailing grace for us to accept. The  
35 commission's 1964 revision of the ritual of the sacrament of baptism began to restore the rite of  
baptism to its original and historic meaning as a sacrament.

40 The Services of the Baptismal Covenant I, II and IV in the 1989 *The United Methodist  
Hymnal*, taken from the 1984 official ritual of the denomination as printed in *The Book of  
Services*, continue this effort to reemphasize the historic significance of baptism. These rituals,  
in accenting the reality of sin and of regeneration, the initiating action of divine grace, and the  
necessity of repentance and faith, are consistent with the Wesleyan combination of  
sacramentalism and evangelicalism.

45 United Methodism is neither alone in the need to recover the significance of baptism, nor in  
its work to do so. Other Christian communions are also reemphasizing the importance of  
baptism for Christian faith and life. To reach the core of the meaning and practice of baptism, all  
have found themselves led back through the life of the Church to the Apostolic age. An  
ecumenical convergence has emerged from this effort, as can be seen in the widely acclaimed  
World Council of Churches document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*.

50 The present committee, as reflected in this document, is continuing this process by offering a  
theological and functional understanding of baptism as the United Methodist Church has

1 embodied it in our ritual. In so doing, the broad spectrum of resources of Scripture, Christian  
Tradition, and the Wesleyan-Evangelical United Brethren Experience has been taken into  
account. We have also considered carefully the statement on baptism in the 1988 *Book of*  
5 *Discipline*, which says that “Christian Unity is founded on the theological understanding that in  
our Baptism, we are made members-in-common of the one Body of Christ. Christian unity is  
not an option; it is a gift to be received and expressed” (“Our Theological Task” Par. 69). The  
growing ecumenical consensus has assisted us in our thinking.

## **I. BAPTISM AND THE CHURCH’S WITNESS TO JESUS CHRIST**

### **10 A. The Divine Initiative of Grace and the Human Response of Faith**

#### **1. The Divine Initiative of Grace**

The essence of divine grace is love, the presence of God experienced as God’s personal  
influence upon us. God desires that all persons be brought into right relationship with God, which  
is their created destiny. To this end God acts preveniently, that is, before we are aware of it.  
15 Prevenient grace has been a crucial element in Wesleyan theology. Since God is the initiator and  
source of grace, all grace is prevenient in nature. This includes both the grace of God that brings  
us to an awareness of our sinful predicament and to repentance, and that which brings us into the  
fullness of Christian maturity. God’s love for humankind is uniquely expressed in Jesus Christ. In  
Christ God has reached out to save humankind, and restore its relationship with God. God desires  
20 our response, through repentance and faith, and through commitment and discipleship.

#### **2. The Human Condition**

Human beings were created in the image of God, a relationship of dependence and trust in  
which we are open to the indwelling presence of God. Thus we were graciously intended to  
25 have fellowship with God and to reflect God-likeness in our lives. This constitutes our authentic  
humanness, which is a gift of God’s love.

Our authentic humanity (which, in the creation account, God declared to be good) is  
corrupted by the reality of sin, and the relationship with God is broken. Through prideful  
overreach or fear of our God-given powers, we exalt our own will, and rebel against God.  
30 Although our basic humanness is not obliterated by sin, nevertheless our very being is  
dominated by an inherent bent toward sinning. This is original sin. A universal human  
condition, it takes the form of idolatry, rebellion, and alienation, affecting individuals, groups,  
and the systemic structures of society. It affects all aspects of life and being. Therefore, before  
God all persons are in need of mercy and forgiveness. Sin may be expressed through deliberate  
35 moral wrong doing or apathy or as cooperation with evil and injustice. The serious, endemic,  
and insidious nature of sin is represented in Baptismal Covenants I and II in *The United*  
*Methodist Hymnal* by the phrase “evil powers of the world” and “spiritual forces of  
wickedness.”

While we have turned from God, God has not abandoned us. Instead, God graciously and  
40 continuously seeks to restore us to that relationship for which we were created and in which our  
authentic humanity is found. Through baptism and other means of grace the Holy Spirit conveys  
God’s forgiving grace, cleanses and delivers us from our sin, makes us a new creation, and  
brings us into the fullness of Christian maturity.

#### **45 3. The Human Response of Faith**

Through grace God has given human beings the gift of faith, which is the capacity to respond  
to divine love, freely receiving or rejecting it. Faith is a way of life, a trusting of one’s whole  
self to God, which shows itself as a willing acceptance of God’s presence in our lives. It is  
commitment to God and reliance upon Christ. Faith joins our life stories to the ongoing story of  
50 God’s grace in human history, as set forth in Old and New Testaments.

1 Personal response to God's grace is called conversion, which takes the form of turning to God  
and turning from sin. This response may take place as a single, radical conversion. But it may  
also be experienced as a dawning realization that one has been constantly loved by God and has  
a personal reliance on Christ. This is a nurtured conversion. Both expressions of conversion  
5 presume the prevenient and justifying grace of God, the presence of a nurturing Christian  
community, a personal response of faith, and a commitment to attaining Christian maturity.

Those who accept God's gift of forgiveness and the promise of salvation begin the new life in  
Christ in the community of the faithful. The faith of this community is also a gift from God and  
exists as a witness to the world. The community of the faithful and every individual within it are  
10 pilgrims on a lifelong journey in faith whose goal is "the measure of the stature of the fullness  
of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

## **B. God's Offer of Grace: Word, Worship and Sacraments**

A sacrament is a sign-act that has been instituted or commanded by Christ in the Gospels.  
15 According to the reformers, these include baptism and the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion, the  
Eucharist). The New Testament records that Jesus was baptized by John and commanded his  
disciples to teach and baptize in the name of the Trinity (Matt. 28:19). Baptism is grounded in the  
life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and involves dying to sin, union with Christ, receiving  
the Holy Spirit, and incorporation into Christ's Church (Rom. 6:1-11; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 4:4-6;  
20 Gal. 3:27-28; John 3:5; Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Pet. 3:18-22). United Methodists affirm this  
understanding in their official documents of faith. Article XVII of the Articles of Religion  
(Methodist) affirms that baptism "is a sign of regeneration or the new birth", and the Confession of  
Faith states that baptism is "a representation of the new birth in Jesus Christ." (EUB)

United Methodists hold that these sign-acts are a special means of grace. The ritual action of a  
25 sacrament does not merely point to the reality of God's presence in the world, but participates in it  
and becomes a means of conveying its reality. God's presence in the sacraments must be received  
by human faith. The two major misunderstandings of the sacrament of baptism are therefore ruled  
out: one, that baptism must be sharply distinguished from the grace of God in Christ, and the  
opposite view that baptism conveys God's grace magically or irreversibly.

30 But the sacraments, though special, are not exclusive means of God's grace. United Methodism  
shares with other Protestant communions the understanding that the proclamation of the Word  
through preaching, teaching, and the life of the Church is a primary means of God's grace. The  
origin and rapid growth of Methodism as a revival movement occurred largely through the  
medium of the proclaimed gospel. John Wesley also emphasized the importance of prayer, fasting,  
35 Bible study, and meetings of persons for mutual edification and support. Wesley viewed the  
sacraments as crucial means of grace. He identified baptism as the initiatory sacrament by which  
we enter into the covenant with God and are admitted as members of Christ's Church. He  
understood the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, and he strongly advocated frequent  
participation in it to nourish and empower the lives of Christians. Wesley also understood the  
40 Church to be a means of grace, because it is in the corporate life of the Church that the effects of  
the sacraments are recognized and nurtured. The Methodist tradition has continued to practice and  
cherish the various means through which divine grace is made present to us.

## **II. THE PRACTICE OF BAPTISM (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE SERVICES OF THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT)**

45 Baptism is by water and the Spirit (Matt. 3:17; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 19:1-7). In God's work of  
salvation, the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection is inseparably linked with the gift of the  
Holy Spirit given on the day of Pentecost. Likewise, participation in Christ's death and  
resurrection is inseparably linked with receiving the Spirit. Christians are baptized with both  
50 water and the Spirit, using different sign actions.



## 1 **A. The Rubrics of Baptism**

A rubric is an instruction on the proper conduct of worship. To insure that baptism is complete the rubrics call for the gospel to be proclaimed, evil renounced, faith in Christ professed, and incorporation into Christ recognized. Water is administered in the name of the triune God (specified in the ritual as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) by an authorized person and the Holy Spirit is invoked with the laying on of hands, in the presence of the congregation.

5 We identify our ritual for baptism as "the Baptismal Covenant." In baptism the Church declares it is bound in covenant to God. At the beginning of Baptismal Covenant I we affirm that "through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy Church." In the case of confirmations or reaffirmations, we say that "through confirmation, and through the reaffirmation of our faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 33). Water has provided the central symbolism for that covenant relationship.

10 The use of water is of primary importance in the sacrament of baptism. Water plays an important symbolic role in the life of the people of God. Our baptismal ritual, for example, speaks of the waters of creation and the flood, the liberation of God's people by passage through the sea, the gift of water in the wilderness, and passage through the Jordan river to the promised land. In baptism we identify ourselves with this people of God and join the community's journey toward God. The use of water in baptism also symbolizes cleansing from sin, death to the old life, and rising to a new life. The water of baptism may be administered by sprinkling, pouring or immersion.

20 The baptismal liturgy includes the biblical symbol of Spirit-anointing by the laying on of hands. In the early centuries of the Church, the laying on of hands was the ritual of membership. Later, for practical reasons, it was separated from water baptism and called confirmation. In confirmation the Holy Spirit sealed the one baptized, and empowered him or her for discipleship. In the worship life of the early Church, the water and the anointing led directly to the celebration of the Lord's Supper in a unified service, regardless of the age of the baptized. The services of the Baptismal Covenant of the United Methodist Church rejoin water baptism and the laying of hands, the symbol of spirit anointing, in recognition that the work of the Holy Spirit is prevenient.

25 Baptism is an ecclesial event that requires the participation of the gathered, worshipping congregation. In a series of promises within the liturgy of baptism, the community affirms its own faith and acts as a sponsor for the one who is baptized. For that reason a baptism is not merely an individualistic, private, or domestic occasion. When legitimate circumstances prevent a baptism from taking place in the midst of the gathered community during its regular worship, every effort should be made to assemble representatives for the celebration. Later, the baptism should be recognized in the public assembly of worship in order that the congregation may make its appropriate actions of commitment and responsibility.

## 30 **B. One Baptism**

40 As there is one Lord, one faith, and one God and Father of all, so there is one baptism (Eph. 4:5-6). The baptizing of both infants and adults is a sign of God's saving grace. God's initiating, enabling, and empowering grace is the same for all persons. The baptism of adults and children differs in that the Christian faith is consciously professed by an adult who is baptized, but it is claimed after baptism by an infant who has been nurtured by parent(s) or surrogate parent(s) and the community of faith.

45 We affirm that there is one baptism into Christ celebrated in the many communions that make up the Body of Christ. Our oneness in Christ calls for mutual recognition of baptism in these communions as a means of expressing the baptismal unity given to us in Christ: The 1976 and 1980 General Conferences adopted the principle of "Mutual Recognition of Membership" based on baptism.

## 1 C. Baptism is Unrepeatable

Historically, the Church universal has regarded baptism as unrepeatable. Originating in the second century, this position was most recently reaffirmed in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982). The claim that baptism is unrepeatable rests on the steadfast faithfulness of God in the sacrament. In our tradition God's initiative establishes a covenant of grace. We do not choose God, but respond to God's choosing of us, as manifested in our baptism. In our God-given freedom we may defy or ignore God's claims upon us, but we do not thus negate God's love for us.

Secondly, this position also emphasizes the sacramental integrity of all Christian communions. We believe that the efficacy of baptism ultimately does not depend on the mode of baptism, the age of the candidate, a candidate's piety or psychological disposition, the character of the person baptizing, the rite used, or the community in which baptism is performed. It is God's grace that makes the sacrament whole.

Thirdly, baptism is initiatory, that is, it stands at the beginning of the covenant journey, as a sign, a seal, and a means of the life of grace in the Christian community. God's promises are signed and sealed and need not be repeated. The continuous gifts of God's grace and power are to be received through other means of grace, such as the Word, the Lord's Supper, Prayer, and the fellowship of the Body of Christ, the church.

Today there is a renewed emphasis on the integrity of personal response and the need for personal acknowledgment of God's grace in significant moments of life. Many baptized individuals desire to celebrate these realities publicly in the worship life of the Church, affirming anew their faith in and commitment to God. Occasions for this may include repentance from unfaithfulness, the discernment of new gifts of the Spirit, new conversion experiences, or significant or life changing moments in life. Some persons may request to be rebaptized at such a time. However, these occasions call for a reaffirmation of baptismal vows as a witness to the good news that while we may be unfaithful, God is not. Appropriate services for such events would be either a "Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant" (see Baptismal Covenant I, *The United Methodist Hymnal*) or "A Celebration of New Beginnings of Faith," (*The United Methodist Book of Worship*). This witness to God's initiating and faithful grace is particularly crucial in North American culture, whose emphasis on individualism often turns personal faith into one more expression of human ability.

## D. The Baptism of Infants and Others Unable to Answer for Themselves

The baptism of an infant incorporates her or him into the community of faith and nurture, including membership in the local church. The New Testament neither mandates nor forbids the baptism of infants, but there is ample evidence for it in early Christian practice and doctrine.

The practice of baptizing infants rests firmly on the understanding that God prepares the way of faith before we request or even know we need help (prevenient grace), as well as upon the corporate nature of the Church as a means of grace. God claims infants as well as adults to be participants in the gracious covenant. In the Services of the Baptismal Covenant, by renewing their vows and promising to love, provide for, and nurture the child in faith, the community prepares itself to become a means of grace.

In baptism the Church celebrates the Spirit's gift to the infant of unique relationships with God, with the Church, and with the infant's own family. God's love for the child is manifested because the child has been created in God's own image. A child who dies without being baptized is received into the love and presence of God by virtue of God's prevenient grace.

The Church affirms that children being born into the brokenness of the world should receive the cleansing and renewing forgiveness of God's grace no less than adults. In baptism they enter into a new life in Christ as adopted children of God and members of the Body of Christ. Through the working of prevenient grace, expressed through the nurture of the community of

1 faith and the family, children led to accept the gift of salvation may grow up saved from utter  
estrangement from God, which is the consequence of sin.

The baptism of infants is properly understood and valued if the child is loved and accepted by  
the faithful and worshiping church and their own family. If a parent(s) or surrogate parent(s)  
5 cannot or will not nurture the child in the faith, or if a god-parent(s) cannot be found who will  
provide such guidance, then baptism is to be postponed until such nurture is available. If a child  
has been baptized but his or her family or surrogate parent(s) do not consciously live the life of  
faith and grace, the congregation has a particular responsibility for incorporating the child into  
its life.

10

## **E. The United Methodist Tradition of Infant Baptism**

The United Methodist Church advocates the baptism of infants within the faith community.  
“Because the redeeming love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, extends to all persons and  
because Jesus explicitly included the children in his kingdom, the pastor of each charge shall  
15 earnestly exhort all Christian parents or guardians to present their children to the Lord in  
baptism at an early age” (1988 *Book of Discipline*, par. 221).

Given the differences in a pluralistic religious culture, some parents choose not to present  
their children for baptism. We respect their sincerity but recognize that these views do not  
coincide with our teaching of the nature of the sacrament of baptism. While we give due liberty  
20 to such parents, we do not accept the assumption that only believer’s baptism is valid, or the  
notion that the baptism of infants magically imparts salvation apart from active faith. Pastors are  
instructed by the *Book of Discipline* to explain our teaching clearly on these matters so that  
parents may give serious consideration to the baptism of their children, unencumbered by  
misunderstanding.

25 If after careful teaching and counsel, parents do not wish to present their infants for baptism  
but request an alternative rite, a brief act of thanksgiving for the birth or adoption of the child  
may be recommended. It should be made clear that such a rite is in no way equivalent to or a  
substitute for baptism, and that it points toward baptism, so that parents in this act are assuming  
responsibility for the growth of the child in faith. The proposed Service of Thanksgiving for the  
30 Birth or Adoption of a Child (while it has a variety of uses other than this) can appropriately be  
adapted for such use.

This service celebrates a new life being brought into the community of faith. If it takes place  
before the infant is baptized, it should be seen as an act of nurture and preparation of parents  
and other family members for that event. The baptism of the infant should take place as soon as  
35 possible after the Service of Thanksgiving.

## **F. Baptism and Christian Nurture**

Baptism signifies the grace of God operating in the time before baptism, in the baptism itself,  
and in subsequent time. If the baptismal covenant is to be fulfilled then Christian nurture is  
40 essential. Christian nurture is the Church’s support of its members and is itself a means of grace  
empowered and fulfilled by God. Christian nurture builds on baptism. The first step in Christian  
nurture is instruction of candidates for baptism and/or parent(s) or surrogate parent(s) in the  
gospel message and the meaning of baptism prior to its administration. The pastor has a specific  
responsibility for this instruction (*The Book of Discipline*, Par. 439.1.b.).

45 After baptism, the Church provides a comprehensive and lifelong process of growing in  
grace. The various stages of life and maturity of faith will give focus to the content of this  
nurturing for the individual and for the community of faith as a whole. Christian nurture also  
means concern with the way the message of grace is communicated. The Church’s traditions  
must be conveyed to each of its members in a loving, vital manner, not only to inform, but to  
50 guide and support, and to encourage the response of faith and works of discipleship. Since it

1 also teaches by example, the Church's own communal life must be a faithful witness to its individual members.

## **G. Profession of The Faith Into Which We Were Baptized**

5 The Holy Spirit works in the lives of persons prior to their baptism, is at work in their baptism, and continues to work in their lives after their baptism. At various times persons recognize this work of the Holy Spirit in themselves, which calls forth renewed faith and commitment.

10 An adult who is baptized professes her or his faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to discipleship, and is confirmed by the power of the Holy Spirit. An infant who is baptized cannot make a profession of faith in this way. However, when the young person is able to respond, conscious faith and intentional commitment are expected. Prompted and enabled by the Holy Spirit, the youth or adult then owns her or his baptism, and makes a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to a life of discipleship. Beginning in 1964, in the former  
15 Methodist Church "confirmation" is the word used to describe this moment of first public profession of one's faith for those who were baptized as infants. In the former EUB Church there was no confirmation until union with the Methodist Church in 1968. With the restoration of confirmation to the baptism ritual as the laying on of hands, it should be emphasized that "confirmation" is what the Holy Spirit does. It is through the confirming work of the Spirit,  
20 promised in baptism, that we are led to a first profession of faith. It is through the continuing confirmation of the Spirit following profession of faith that we are empowered to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ ("The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ"). Christian nurture must be intentionally oriented to this end.

25 In the early Church, when baptism and confirmation were a unified rite, the theology of initiation and new birth applied to both parts of the rite for new Christians of all ages. In the Middle Ages, when confirmation was separated from baptism and often took place years afterward, the theological unity also was broken. Official theology began to speak of confirmation as "completing" baptism. John Wesley did not recommend confirmation to his preachers or to the  
30 new Methodist Church in America. Confirmation is a term and practice that does not have a long history in the American Methodist tradition. Although there were pastor's classes for membership, the first official confirmation service to be adopted by American Methodists was included in the 1964 edition of *The Methodist Hymnal*. It, too, implied that baptism was incomplete as incorporation into the Body of Christ and membership in the Church. Because it gives a  
35 misleading view of baptism, the continued use of the term "confirmation" in the United Methodist Church is incompatible with our understanding of baptism and membership in the Church.

Persons baptized in infancy, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the nurture, grace, and love one has received from God through the community of faith, are expected to make a public  
40 profession of faith in Jesus Christ and commit themselves to responsible discipleship. This moment, now called confirmation, is more aptly titled Profession of The Faith Into Which We Were Baptized. This profession is not concerned with Church membership as such, but is the first significant affirmation of one's baptism and owning of one's faith.

At some point in the growth process there should be a special preparation for this event of Profession of The Faith Into Which We Were Baptized, focusing on one's understanding of  
45 one's self and one's personal appropriation of the Christian faith, spiritual disciplines, and discipleship. Since baptism includes us in the Body of Christ, the Church, this process should not be understood as preparation for Church membership. Instead, it is a special time for experiencing, reflecting on, growing in, and sharing God's grace. This provides the context and opportunity to make a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to Christian  
50 discipleship. It is a time when the youth consciously embraces Christian vocation, the

1 priesthood of all believers, in which she or he was included in baptism. Once this response has  
been consciously made, the young woman or man should participate in a special rite celebrating  
this event.

5 Profession of The Faith Into Which We Were Baptized, which is to be celebrated in the midst  
of the worshipping congregation, should include the opportunity for a personal or group witness.  
This moment contains all of the elements of conversion: The surrender and death of self and  
becoming an instrument of God's purpose in the world. One should not be rebaptized as a part  
of the Profession of The Faith Into Which We Were Baptized.

10 Youth who were not baptized as infants share in the same period of preparation, but for them  
it is a preparation for baptism and becoming a member of the Church.

## **H. Reaffirmation of The Faith Into Which We Were Baptized**

15 The life of faith to which the baptized person is called has often been compared to a journey  
or a pilgrimage. On this journey we are continually challenged by competing faith claims, new  
situations, and life-changing experiences. We meet these challenges and proceed on the journey  
of faith within the redeeming and sanctifying community of faith, the body of Christ.

20 Christian nurture from the point of profession of faith onward will focus on helping persons  
to reflect on their lives in light of the Christian faith, to grow in their understanding of scripture  
and tradition, and to make new commitments to discipleship. Significant challenges and  
changes call for nurturing and liturgical celebration that is responsive to them.

25 All baptized Christians, from time to time, will want to participate in acts of reaffirmation and  
renewal within the covenant community. A reaffirmation of faith would include a prayer that the  
Holy Spirit will seal and make firm our faith in order to empower us in the life and fellowship  
of all true disciples. It may include the use of water in symbolic ways that must not be  
interpreted as baptism or rebaptism.

Reaffirmation of faith is a human response to God's grace and therefore may be repeated at  
any point in a person's faith journey. Any life-changing experience may be an appropriate  
occasion for guided study, reflection, and public reaffirmation of faith.

## **III. THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM**

30 The sacrament of baptism is grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and  
is instituted by his command and example. (Rom. 6:1-11; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 4:4-6; Gal.  
3:27-28; John 3:5; Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Pet. 3:18-22). The meaning of baptism touches directly on  
many points of Christian doctrine. As we clarify these points, we take up a crucial part of our  
35 theological task as United Methodists. Our reflection on baptism allows us to deepen our  
appreciation for the gift of our own baptism, and live into baptismal promises with the "power,  
love, and self-discipline" of Christian maturity (2 Tim. 1:7).

40 Baptism is an eschatological event. Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God  
is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). As such, baptism as a sacrament (and  
therefore every individual baptism) should be seen in light of God's intervening and saving  
action in world history; it is an event in the life of the Church through which God constitutes the  
body of Christ. Through baptism we are incorporated into the ongoing history of Christ's  
mission, identified with and made participants in God's new history in Jesus Christ and the new  
age that Christ is bringing.

### **A. Creation and Baptism**

45 God is free to be graciously known to us directly or through means. Because God is Creator,  
objects of creation can become the bearers of the Creator's presence, power, and meaning, and  
thus become sacramental means of God's grace. Sacraments are effective means of God's  
50 presence mediated through the created world. Given that God is infinite and we are finite, this is

1 God's chosen way of communicating with us and relating to us. God becoming incarnate in human form in Jesus Christ is the supreme instance of this kind of divine action. In this sense creation itself is God's initiating sacramental action and covenant.

5 In creation God made human beings "in the image of God," a relationship of dependence and trust in which we are open to the indwelling presence of God, and are given freedom to be creative agents in the realizing of God's will and purpose for the whole of creation and history. But we were unfaithful to that covenant relationship, and the result was a thorough distortion of the image of God in ourselves and our degrading of the whole of creation. It is through baptism that God acts to renew God's image in us. God gives us a new vocation, to reestablish God's  
10 reign and order over a broken world and to act as stewards of God's creation. This God does through the gift of new life in the Spirit (Rom. 7:7). Baptism speaks of, inaugurates, and is an earnest of God's new possibilities for the whole of creation and history.

## **B. The Holy Spirit and Baptism**

15 The Holy Spirit, who is the power of creation (Gen. 1:2), is the effective agent of baptism and salvation, working in the lives of people before, in, and after their baptism. God bestows upon baptized persons the presence of the Holy Spirit, marks them with a seal, and implants in their hearts the first installment of their inheritance as sons and daughters of God. The Holy Spirit nurtures the life of faith in their hearts until the final deliverance when they will enter into its  
20 full possession (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13-14).

Since the Apostolic age, baptism by water and baptism of the Holy Spirit have been connected. Water baptism symbolizes the beginning of a new life in Christ. The anointing with the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the laying on of hands and the optional use of oil, promises to the one baptized the power to fulfill the kind of life that is set in process by water baptism.  
25 Together these symbols point to, anticipate, and offer participation in God's presence in the world, in the life of the community of faith, and in the lives of those who are part of that community.

## **C. The Covenant of Salvation and Baptism**

30 Through baptism we are initiated into covenant with God. The concept of covenant runs through both the Old and New Testaments. By covenant God constituted a servant people both in Israel and in the Church of Jesus Christ. The covenant connects God, the covenant community of faith, and the person being baptized. All three—God, community, and individual—are essential to the actualization of the baptismal covenant. The faithful grace of  
35 God initiates the covenant and enables the community and the person to respond with faith.

## **D. Incorporation into the Body of Christ and Baptism**

Christ constitutes the Church as his Body, a living spiritual organism, by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13, 27; Eph. 5:29-30; Col. 1:18). Baptism is Christ's act in the Church,  
40 the sacrament of initiation and incorporation into the Body of Christ. A child or adult incorporated into the Body of Christ through baptism is thereby an integral part of the Body of Christ, of the catholic (universal) Church, of the denomination, and a member of the local congregation.

Baptism also initiates our vocation in the general ministry of the Church in the world. As one  
45 grows in faith and maturity, the community of faith will nurture him or her, providing new opportunities for service where individual gifts and graces are discerned, developed, and used.

## **E. Justification and Baptism**

In baptism God offers us the forgiveness of our sins (Acts 2:38). Forgiveness is a healing, a  
50 beginning of convalescence whose goal is to restore us to the image of God. God accomplishes



1 this reconciliation through the atonement of Jesus Christ made real in our lives through the work  
of the Holy Spirit. We respond by confessing and repenting of our sin, and by affirming our  
faith that Jesus Christ has accomplished our salvation. God's forgiveness renews life in us, and  
makes us new beings in Christ.

5

## **F. Regeneration and Baptism**

Baptism is the sacramental symbol and seal of new life through and in Christ by the power of  
the Holy Spirit, variously identified as regeneration, new birth, and being born again. Article  
XVII of the Articles of Religion affirms that baptism "is a sign of regeneration or the new  
10 birth," and the Confession of Faith states that baptism is "a representation of the new birth in  
Jesus Christ." Being born again is the beginning of a new life in Christ. Those who are born  
again renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the powers of this world, and repent of  
their sin (Baptismal Covenants I and II in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, pp. 34 and 50), and  
thus put aside the values and goals of secularized society and embrace those incarnated in the  
15 ministry of Jesus. Those who are born again are offered the gift of assurance, that through Jesus  
Christ our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God.

Regeneration is the renewal of the whole life by the saving grace of Jesus Christ,  
appropriated by faith. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and is associated with the sacraments as a  
promised means. Regeneration is not an infusion of some vital substance or moral holiness.  
20 Rather, it re-establishes the relationship with God for which we were created and makes us a  
new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). This relationship grows and matures through the work of the Holy  
Spirit and our willingness to "live answerable" to what has happened in our baptism. Because  
the Church is a primary means of God's grace, its task is to nurture and support all those who  
are baptized into the community of faith. This was the genius of the Class Meetings of early  
25 Methodism. Because of this new relationship, and the continuing growth in grace, our behavior  
changes, and we lead new lives.

Baptism is the means of entry into new life in Christ (John 3:5; Titus 3:5), but new birth may  
not always coincide with the moment of the administration of water or the sign of the gift of the  
Holy Spirit. Our awareness of our own redemption by Christ, and new life in him, may vary  
30 throughout our lives. In whatever way the reality of a new birth is experienced, it carries out the  
promises God made to us in our baptism.

## **G. Sanctification and Baptism**

Rebirth into new life in Christ, which is signified by baptism, is the beginning of that process  
35 of growth in grace and holiness through which God brings us into conscious relationship with  
Jesus Christ, and brings our lives increasingly into conformity with the divine will.

Sanctification is a gift of the gracious presence of the Holy Spirit and a yielding to the Spirit's  
enabling of one's love for God and neighbor. Holiness of heart and life, in the Wesleyan  
tradition, always involves both personal and social holiness.

40 Baptism, as the gift of God's redeeming grace, is the doorway to the sanctified life. Baptism  
teaches us to live in the expectation of further gifts of God's grace, it initiates us into a  
community of faith that prays for sanctification, and it calls us to a life lived in faithfulness to  
God's gift. Baptized believers and the community of faith are obligated to manifest to the world  
the new race of redeemed humanity which lives in loving relationship with God and puts an end  
45 to all human estrangements. There are no conditions of human life (including age or intellectual  
ability, race or nationality, sexual gender or identity, class or handicapping conditions) which  
exclude persons from the sacrament of baptism. We strive for and look forward to the reign of  
God on earth of which baptism is a sign. Baptism fulfilled only when the believer and the  
Church are wholly conformed to the image of Christ.

50

## 1 **H. Christian Unity and Baptism**

Both sign and seal of our common discipleship, baptism brings us into union with Christ, with each other, and with the Church in every time and place. Through baptism the Spirit creates equality in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27-28) and constitutes the basic bond of unity  
5 (Eph. 4:4-6). One baptism serves to call the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their oneness in Christ in the fellowship.

## **IV. BAPTISM IN RELATION TO THE LORD'S SUPPER, CHRISTIAN MINISTRY, AND OTHER RITES OF THE CHURCH**

10 In a means of grace tradition, such as United Methodism, there is an inclusive emphasis upon God's relation to human beings and upon human response to God. God encounters persons through many avenues, most usually in the corporate life of the community, Bible study, preaching, prayer, fasting, Christian conference,<sup>1</sup> baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Each of these means complements the others, and in the interaction of these means the full richness of God's  
15 presence is found.

### **A. Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion, or the Eucharist)**

Through baptism the Church is created, and in the Lord's Supper the Church is sustained. It is most fitting that the Service of Baptism conclude with Holy Communion, in which the union of  
20 the new member with the body of Christ is most fully expressed. Holy Communion is a sacred meal in which Christians, in the simple act of eating bread and drinking wine, proclaim and participate in all that God has done, is doing, and will continue to do for us in Christ. When Christians gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we remember the grace given to us in our baptism and partake of the spiritual food necessary for sustaining and fulfilling the promises of  
25 salvation. The Lord's table should be open to all who respond to Christ's love and acceptance, regardless of age. Persons receiving communion who are not baptized should be counseled and nurtured toward baptism at an early time.

### **B. Christian Ministry and Baptism**

30 Baptism is the ritual symbol through which God claims us individually and corporatively for the ministry of all Christians.<sup>2</sup> This ministry is the activity of giving our whole lives in discipleship to Christ based on an active, living relationship with God through the Holy Spirit.

All Christian ministry is based on the awareness that one has been called to a new  
35 relationship not only with God, but also with the world. Christians are to embody the gospel and the Church in the world, and declare the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into light (1 Pet. 2:9). We exercise our vocation as Christians by witnessing to Christ in our daily life and labor, as a ministry of reconciliation and peacemaking in the world. This is the universal priesthood of all believers.

From within this universal priesthood of all believers, God calls, and the Church authorizes, a  
40 special representative ministry. The vocation of those in representative ministry lies in focusing, modeling, supervising, shepherding, enabling, and empowering the general ministry of the Church. Their ordination to Word, Sacrament and Order, or consecration to diaconal service, is grounded in the same baptism that constitutes the calling of the general priesthood of all  
45 believers.

### **C. Christian Marriage and Baptism**

In the new ritual for marriage the minister addresses the couple: "I ask you now, in the  
50 presence of God and these people, to declare your intention to enter union with one another through the grace of Jesus Christ, who calls you into union with himself as acknowledged in your baptism."

1 This reference to baptism is understood in the tradition of the biblical covenant in which  
God's initiative in love is met with our response in love and fidelity, "forsaking all others." Thus  
the biblical covenant, and our participation in it through baptism, is the typology for Christian  
marriage as a covenant of commitment based on love.

5

## **D. Services of Death and Resurrection and Baptism**

The Christian gospel is a message of death and resurrection, that of Christ and our own.  
Baptism signifies our dying and rising with Christ. Death no longer has dominion over Christ,  
and we believe that if we have died with Christ we shall also live with him (Rom. 6:8-9). As the  
10 liturgy of the Service of Death and Resurrection says, "Dying, Christ destroyed our death.  
Rising, Christ restored our life. Christ will come again in glory. As in baptism (Name) put on  
Christ, so in Christ may (Name) be clothed with Glory" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 870).  
When a Christian dies it is in the hope that "to live is Christ, to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

15 Committal of the deceased to God and the body to its final resting place recalls the act of  
baptism and derives its Christian meaning from God's baptismal covenant with us. We  
acknowledge the reality of death and the pain of our loss, and we give thanks for the life that  
was lived and shared with us. We worship in the awareness that our gathering includes,  
invisibly, the whole communion of saints, and that in Christ the circle is unbroken.

## **20 V. CONCLUSION**

Baptism is a crucial threshold that we cross on our journey in faith. But there are many  
others, including the final transition from death to life eternal. We await the final moment of  
grace, when Christ comes in victory at the end of the age to bring all who are in Christ into the  
glory of that victory. Baptism has significance in time and gives meaning to the end of time. In  
25 it we have a vision of a world recreated and humanity transformed and exalted by God's  
presence. We are told that in this new heaven and new earth there will be no temple, for even  
our Churches and services of worship will have had their time and ceased to be, in the presence  
of the God who will be "everything to everyone."

30 Until that day, we are charged to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is at the heart of the gospel of grace, and it is at  
the core of the church's mission. When we baptize we say what we understand as Christians  
about ourselves and our community: that we are loved into being by God, and lost because of  
sin, but redeemed and saved in Jesus Christ to live new lives and look for his coming again in  
glory. Baptism is an expression of God's love for the world, and the effects of baptism also  
35 express God's grace. As baptized people of God, we therefore respond with praise and  
thanksgiving, praying that God's will be done in our own lives:

We your people stand before you,  
water-washed and Spirit born,

40

By your grace, our lives we offer.  
Recreate us; God, transform!

—Ruth Duck, "Wash, O God Our Sons and Daughters"<sup>3</sup>

45

<sup>1</sup>Christian conference: discernment of the will of God through intentional conversation between  
faithful Christian disciples.

<sup>2</sup>See the 1988 *Book of Discipline*, par. 106, "The General Ministry of All Christian Believers."

50 <sup>3</sup>*The United Methodist Hymnal*. The United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, 1989.

# NOTES

# YOUR RESPONSE

The General Conference requests users of this study guide to provide feedback to the Committee to Study Baptism and Related Rites. For that purpose, please take a few moments to respond to the following questions. The committee greatly appreciates receiving your input.

Instructions: For each question, please circle the number that comes closest to expressing your own view. When you are finished, please tear out these pages and mail them to the Committee to Study Baptism and Related Rites, United Methodist Church, Box 840, Nashville, TN 37202. Do not put your name on these pages. All responses will remain anonymous. A statistical summary of the responses will be compiled.

**1. How would you rate the paper — excellent (E), good (G), fair (F), or poor (P) on each of the following?**

	E	G	F	P
a. How clearly the material was presented	1	2	3	4
b. How much it contributed to your understanding of baptism	1	2	3	4
c. How much it stimulated your own thinking	1	2	3	4
d. How relevant it was to your personal life	1	2	3	4
e. How much it enriched your faith	1	2	3	4
f. How effective it was overall	1	2	3	4

**2. Did you study the baptism paper as part of a class or entirely on your own?**

As part of a class (or study group)	1
Entirely on my own	2
Other	3

**3. If you studied the paper as part of a class or group: How would you rate the group—excellent (E), good (G), fair (F), or poor (P)—on each of the following?**

	E	G	F	P
a. Preparation of the leader	1	2	3	4
b. Quality of the discussion	1	2	3	4
c. Use of the study guide	1	2	3	4
d. Respect for different views	1	2	3	4
e. Support among group members	1	2	3	4

**4. As a result of studying the paper, would you say that you have experienced each of the following, or not?**

	Yes	No
a. A deeper sense of the meaning of your own baptism	1	2
b. An enriched experience of baptism when it occurs at your church	1	2

	Yes	No
c. A better understanding of the church's traditions about baptism	1	2
d. Greater clarity about what you believe about baptism	1	2
e. Feeling confused about the meaning of baptism	1	2
f. A desire to learn more about baptism in the future	1	2
g. A better understanding of infant dedication	1	2
h. Greater clarity about the relationship of baptism to membership	1	2
i. A greater appreciation of God's grace	1	2
j. A sense of growth in your spiritual life	1	2
k. A closer relationship to God	1	2

**5. How much did the study contribute to your own understanding of each of the following—a great deal (G), a fair amount (F), a little (L), or none (N)?**

	G	F	L	N
a. Confirmation	1	2	3	4
b. Infant baptism	1	2	3	4
c. Adult baptism	1	2	3	4
d. Communion	1	2	3	4
e. Worship	1	2	3	4
f. The role of the Holy Spirit	1	2	3	4
g. The Bible	1	2	3	4
h. Methodist history	1	2	3	4
i. Evangelism	1	2	3	4

**6. How much effort would you say that you personally put into studying the paper?**

A great deal	1
A fair amount	2
A little	3
Unsure	4

**7. At this point in your life, how meaningful would you say baptism is to you?**

Very meaningful	1
Fairly meaningful	2
Not very meaningful	3
Not at all meaningful	4
Unsure	5

**8. Compared with a few years ago, would you say baptism is now more meaningful to you, neither more nor less meaningful, or less meaningful to you?**

More meaningful	1
Neither more nor less meaningful	2
Less meaningful	3

**9. Different aspects of baptism are likely to be more meaningful to some people than to others. Please indicate how meaningful each of the following is to you—very meaningful (V), somewhat meaningful (S) or not very meaningful(N)?**

Baptism as.....	V	S	N
a. A way to celebrate the birth of children.	1	2	3
b. A means of welcoming children or adults into the community of faith	1	2	3
c. A tangible sign of God's grace	1	2	3
d. A symbol of God's presence in all of life	1	2	3
e. A way of attaining salvation	1	2	3
f. A link with long traditions of the church	1	2	3
g. A working of the Holy Spirit	1	2	3
h. A ceremony that draws the congregation closer together	1	2	3
i. A covenant between God and God's people	1	2	3
j. A vow made by parents to instruct their children in the faith	1	2	3
k. A time to remember and give thanks	1	2	3
l. A reminder of our responsibility to live out our faith	1	2	3
m. A common bond among all Christians	1	2	3
n. A way of strengthening the family	1	2	3
o. A reminder of Jesus' life and ministry	1	2	3
p. A symbol of new birth in Christ	1	2	3

**10. As you currently understand the Christian faith, how important would you say baptism is? Would you say.....**

Baptism is an absolutely essential feature of the Christian faith	1
Baptism is very important, signifying what is essential in our faith	2
Baptism is very important but not as important as some other elements of the Christian faith	3
Baptism is fairly important but certainly not essential	4
Baptism is not very important	5

**11. How well does each of the following statements describe your own views about baptism—very well (VW), fairly well (FW), or not very well (NV)?**

	VW	FW	NV
a. Baptism is essential in order to receive salvation and everlasting life	1	2	3
b. Baptism is not essential for salvation, but it is a sign of God's grace	1	2	3
c. When adults are baptized, it shows that they have accepted Christ	1	2	3
d. Baptism is mainly a way in which the congregation pledges to accept and support new members	1	2	3
e. Baptism is a symbol of God's presence in all of life.	1	2	3
f. Baptism should occur only once in a person's life.	1	2	3
g. There are other times when making a renewed commitment to the Christian life is important.	1	2	3
h. The church should provide occasions for individuals to renew their faith in light of baptism.	1	2	3
i. Baptism initiates a person into the ministry of all Christians.	1	2	3
j. Baptism in some way means membership in the church.	1	2	3
k. A personal profession of faith is necessary for growth in the Christian life.	1	2	3
l. Living out the meaning of one's baptism is a lifelong process.	1	2	3
m. Baptism is a human response to God's grace.	1	2	3

**12. On the whole, did you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the main points of the document?**

Strongly agree	1
Somewhat agree	2
Somewhat disagree	3
Strongly disagree	4
Unsure	5

**To help us in tabulating the responses, please answer the following questions.**

**13. Are you:**

Male	1	Female	2
------	---	--------	---

**14. What is your approximate age?**

18 or younger	1
19 through 34	2
35 through 50	3
51 through 65	4
Older than 65	5



**15. In which United Methodist jurisdiction do you live?**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| Northeast (ME, NH, VT, NY, CT, RI, PA, NJ, MD, WV) | 1 |
| Southeast (VA, KY, TN, NC, SC, GA, FL, AL, MS)     | 2 |
| North Central (OH, IN, IL, MI, WI, MN, IA, ND, SD) | 3 |
| South Central (MO, NE, KS, AR, OK, TX, NM, LA)     | 4 |
| West (MT, WY, CO, AZ, UT, NV, CA, OR, WA, AL, HI)  | 5 |
| Central Conference                                 | 6 |

**16. How often do you attend religious services?**

- |                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| At least once a week       | 1 |
| Two or three times a month | 2 |
| About once a month         | 3 |
| Several times a year       | 4 |
| Once a year or less        | 5 |

**17. Are you currently a member of The United Methodist Church?**

- |                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Yes                            | 1 |
| No, but am a member of another | 2 |
| No, not a member of any church | 3 |

**18. In what denomination were you baptized?**

- |                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| United Methodist tradition | 1 |
| Other denomination         | 2 |
| Not baptized               | 3 |

**19. Please indicate whether each of the following applies to you.**

- |                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| a. I was baptized as an infant        | 1 |
| b. I was baptized as a youth or adult | 2 |
| c. I have been confirmed              | 3 |

**20. On a scale from 1 to 6 where "1" is "very conservative" and "6" is "very liberal," where would you place yourself in terms of your religious views?**

Very conservative				very liberal			unsure
1	2	3	4	5	6	0	

**21. Do you have any other comments about the document that you would like to share? If so, please write them on a separate sheet of paper and attach it to this questionnaire.**

The Committee to Study Baptism presented the paper, "By Water and the Spirit," to the General Conference with the recommendation that it be made available to the widest possible audience for study and response.

That recommendation came from our conviction that not only is there a diversity of United Methodist opinion about baptism, but there also exists the possibility of formulating a statement about baptism that represents a synthesis of our Wesleyan heritage, the ecumenical consensus, and reflection upon current United Methodist experience.

We developed this study book so you could be a part of the process, both thinking about what baptism means and helping to shape a denominational statement about baptism. Returning the questionnaire will give you a voice in the final draft of the statement.

The questions printed on this page were raised by the legislative section of Faith and Mission at the 1992 General Conference, with the instruction that they be a part of the questions for discussion. The study guide has done that. But if there is one question, or several, you would like to address in direct correspondence to the committee, we invite you to do so. Written comments may be sent to the same address as you send the questionnaire.

### The Committee to Study Baptism

1. According to the paper, is there a difference between church membership on the basis of profession of faith in Christ and membership on the basis on initiation into the family of God?
2. Does the paper teach that baptism is necessary for salvation? What would be the implications of such a teaching?
3. What is necessary for salvation, according to the paper?
4. If you become a member of the church in baptism, can you ever lose your membership?
5. Is the theology of the paper consistent with:
  - a) the liturgies in the hymnal?
  - b) our present practices in the churches?
  - c) our doctrinal standards, as found in paragraph 68, section 3?
  - d) other parts of the Discipline?
  - e) practices in United Methodist churches in other parts of the world?
6. What makes baptism valid? Is it belief, faith, certain mandated words, the proper ordination of the clergy, and so on?
7. What would be the effect of prohibiting infant dedication? Private baptisms? Rebaptisms?
8. Does the paper teach baptismal regeneration? What are the implications of a teaching of baptismal regeneration?
9. Does the paper enhance or diminish the creative tension between the sacramental and evangelical strains of United Methodism? If so, what are the implications of this teaching?
10. What effect would discontinuing preparatory membership and confirmation have on the life of the church?
11. Is there a necessary relationship between God's initiative in baptism and the human response of faith?

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# BY WATER AND THE SPIRIT

## A United Methodist Understanding Of Baptism

**Serves as a study and reference book  
as families and individuals prepare for baptism.**

**Looks at issues around a much-talked about,  
sometimes-controversial topic in the church.**

**Explores the deep spiritual meaning  
of the sacrament of Baptism.**

**Provides a vehicle for persons to impact  
the theological position of the Church.**

**Includes a glossary of theological terms related to Baptism.**

*By Water and the Spirit* is your opportunity to help shape the official position of the United Methodist Church.

In 1988, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church formed a committee to study the meaning of Baptism, particularly in relationship to questions of salvation, church membership, confirmation, the Lord's Supper, and other rites of the church. The committee brought to the 1992 General Conference a Baptism Study Document, and a recommendation that it be studied throughout the denomination from 1993 through 1996.

*By Water and the Spirit* includes that Baptism Study Document and material to help participants study it. Six 45-minute sessions provide Bible study and reflection questions about the meaning and experience of baptism.

Each study book contains a survey sheet to be mailed to the Baptism Study Committee. Individuals and study groups can help shape the official position of the United Methodist Church by responding through this survey. The United Methodist Church is committed to having the theological position of the church on Baptism come from the "grass roots", rather than being dictated by "the hierarchy."

**Dr. Dwight Vogel, professor at Garrett / Evangelical Theological Seminary,  
is the author of the study helps.**



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